

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Eighth Sunday after Trinity
July 22, 2018
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Our Lord Jesus said to the apostles, “Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest awhile.” The apostles had just returned from their first missionary journey. But He might have had more in mind than just retreat and refreshment. The clue is in the preceding passage. Herod had beheaded John the Baptist. John was immensely popular with the multitudes. Right now the political atmosphere was highly charged. If a revolt broke out, and the people championed Jesus against Herod, there would have been a bloody massacre. Christ came to save us from our sins, not get us killed at the hands of a nasty tyrant like Herod! So it may have been a very wise move for Jesus and His closest followers to lay low until the situation cooled.

All of that is speculation. It is interesting, but it is conjecture. The important thing is what actually *did* happen. And what happened was there was no rest for the weary! Not only did the crowd follow Jesus to the lonely place but *they got there first!* The weary apostles must have been annoyed, but St Mark described our Lord as deeply moved by this leaderless group in such a lonely place. It likely reminded Jesus of sheep without a shepherd.

The Lord “began to teach them many things.” Picture Jesus passing among the crowds, dealing eagerly with each small group. They *had* to be in small groups to hear Him. There was no public address system! The lonely place was probably no natural amphitheater to carry a voice. So Our Lord moved among the crowd speaking to small gatherings. It all took time. It grew late. That is what sets up the great incident known as the Feeding of the Five Thousand. You’ll hear about that next week. What has our attention here is the description of God Incarnate, tired as He must have been, slowly making His way among all these people, stopping to talk and teach until it was very late.

What did these people believe about Jesus which made them come to such a remote and lonely place? They were following their intuition or curiosity. All of them had a suspicion life should be better than what they were living. In one way or another they hoped Jesus was the answer. In a very short time the vast majority of these people would find out they were not ready for the answers Christ gave them. And they would go away.

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But as Jesus walked among the crowd, in that multitude He recognized “the meek” who He had once declared shall inherit the earth. These were the souls ready, or getting ready, to turn their lives over to God. Jesus once preached the wheat was ready for harvest, and warned there were plenty of weeds growing up with the wheat. In another place Jesus said “many are called but few are chosen.” It was just that way with this crowd. Some were ready to turn to the Lord, and many were not.

That is a description of the Catholic Church. The Church calls *all* people to repentance and conversion. But we have the Church Militant down to our day because the meek accept the Lord, receive His grace, and continue His work against every possible obstacle.

Our gospel passage shows a weary Lord and apostles in great need of some rest and relaxation. If the conditions were all wrong for the Light of Christ to be kindled in souls on that day in such adverse conditions and place, we can take heart *it did happen*. Or we can think of the 400,000 or so souls in the Archdiocese of Boston who, week in and week out, never miss a Sunday Mass. That group, not the disaffected and alienated, not the “cafeteria Catholics” is the Church’s constituency. With them she can continue to rekindle hope, and the hope of holiness and beauty, in a whole sin-darkened world. It is a world where Christ Jesus is still rejected or dismissed by so many.

In every age of the Church, the power and light of Our Lord are drawn forth and given out to men and women in proportion to their desire and petition for the things of God. Christ “began to teach them many things” that day. Most of it was beyond the understanding of sin-tainted humanity. Why should we expect anything different today? But *He did it anyway*, for all of them, of course. Yet Jesus knew full well only a few of them would respond with their lives, and be ready for the great revelation Christ would then provide. That every evening, in the Feeding of the Five Thousand, Christ would declare He Himself is the Bread of Life, the food of their souls’ salvation.