

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Eighth Sunday after Trinity
August 2, 2020

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Much is made of the feeding of the five thousand from five loaves and two kippers. All four gospels make this the central scene in the ministry of our Lord prior to Holy Week. It is a wonderful, prophetic, foretaste of the Mass. But it always reminds me of those marquee signs out front of some protestant churches and which advertise the Sunday sermon. This one could have the catchy title: “The time Jesus went to a remote place for rest *and didn't get it!*”

That is what sets up the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. Christ and His twelve disciples arrived by boat at their chosen retreat site, but found *the crowd got there first!* Jesus had been preaching to this crowd for days. During that period He reeled off a whole string of parables. Some of these we have heard as Sunday gospels the past few weeks, and they have been weekday Mass gospels during this same period. In the giving of those parables the Son of God was absorbed in spiritual things. But He was never far from conscious awareness of the physical needs of His hearers. Exhaustion and pain can make most of us irritable and uncharitable towards others. Not so the gentle Saviour! Christ's exhaustion brought Him closer to the fallen human nature He had joined and came to redeem.

But then it was time for dinner! The problem was how to provide sufficient food for this crowd in such a remote location. The disciples looked on the provisions they had packed for their own retreat. But they were about to learn, perhaps for the first time, without Christ a solution was impossible. Motivated by love, Jesus organized the distribution, and acted as host, while the disciples carried out the Master's intentions towards His guests in the crowd. That is a description of the Mass. And as in the Mass, there was a great harmony in this scene.

If you've been lucky enough to visit the catacombs in Rome you have seen murals of fish and loaves and the wicker baskets. These were the symbols of Christ as “the Bread of the World in mercy given.” Fish and loaves and wicker baskets were assurances of the Lord's love and sympathy and power and glory, to a persecuted people who knew they needed to be saved. That is a good working definition of a Christians: someone who knows he needs to be saved and that only Christ can save him.

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In the account of what happened, do not miss the gentle, and perhaps *playful* moment Christ tells His Church to feed these people. “*You* give them something to eat.” The Church will be doing that daily down to this very day and this very Mass. On Tuesday and Thursdays each week a large delivery truck picks up donated food collected in the St Theresa Rectory garage for a Boston food pantry. Never have those donations been so needed as in this time of pandemic and large-scale unemployment. At the Lord’s command, the Church must give Christ to His people. But there had to be a first time! Today’s Gospel was *a non-sacramental dry run!* The disciples were sure they had nothing to give. Christ said: Go on, you do it; you can do it.”

That is exactly what they did. The disciples shared Christ’s sympathy for the crowd, and relied upon His power in obedience to His command. They were sure it was when Jesus took their small meal into His Own hands the food was multiplied. We are not told anyone *saw* this happen. The actual miracle is understated, just as it was at the changing of water into wine at the Cana wedding feast. When it was all over, picture the scene: the crowd has gone. It is quiet by the lakeshore. Jesus is asleep. But His disciples were unable to sleep. Instead, they kept staring at twelve wicker baskets *when they were sure they had only brought one!*

Every Christian has a basket of food. It is the grace of God within you, which comes by Word and Sacrament through the work of the Holy Spirit. None of this grace is unnecessary, nor can it be spared. But under Christ’s orders it must be *shared*. Each Christian is called to be God’s agent, waiting upon the Lord’s guests in the wilderness. We are to attend to Christ’s teaching, share His sympathy, and rely upon His power, as did the disciples at the feeding of the five thousand. By so doing we will also be giving Our Blessed Lord the joy of knowing our lives are in harmony with His life.

A consequence of our love for Jesus is that we too will understand the emptiness of those who do not follow Him in this wilderness. Just now there is plenty of wilderness for people! Their need, perhaps unknown to them, is to be fed by Jesus. And He says: “Go on, you do it; you can do it.”