

Matthew 14:13-21**Invited By Jesus**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today as we prepare to gather again around the Lord's table to receive from him, it's very fitting that our Gospel reading is Jesus feeding a hungry crowd. The feeding of the 5000 is one of those very well-known miracles of Jesus. With just five loaves of bread and two fish, Jesus feeds a hungry crowd with plenty to spare. Five loaves, two fish, and a prayer of thanksgiving was enough to feed 5000 men, plus uncounted women and children.

Some like to focus on the significance of the blessing and the 12 baskets of leftovers, but today I want to focus on the lead up to this miracle. This happens immediately after the death of John the Baptist. John, a cousin of Jesus had been executed by King Herod, and that's why Jesus withdrew to a solitary place. We can imagine that he wanted to spend some time alone as he mourned his cousin's death. But the crowds followed. They left the towns behind and came into the wilderness with him.

The way Matthew connects this back to John's death invites us to consider all the other times in the scriptures that we are taken into the wilderness. The wilderness is a lonely, deserted, and uninhabitable place, both literally and metaphorically. And we have to start with John himself, who preached repentance in the wilderness. And Jesus, after his baptism by John, was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to fast for forty days, and be tested in preparation for his ministry. We could even go back to the Israelites in the time of the Exodus, wandering for forty years in the wilderness.

However long the time in the wilderness is, it can be a good place to grieve, to pray, and to repent. The wilderness is often depicted as a lonely place, but not because God is absent. Rather, because there are no distractions in the wilderness, it can be a place of great spiritual intensity. In the early church, it was not uncommon for Christians to deliberately spend time in the wilderness to remove themselves from the distractions of earthly things and focus their devotion on the things of the kingdom of heaven. Some chose to spend their entire lives dedicated to such things. Others would come out for a time to be spiritually renewed before returning home.

In our reading today, Jesus' time in the wilderness is cut short not by his own choosing, but by the crowds who follow him there. And Jesus, even in his grief, has compassion on them, and we read that he heals the sick amongst them. Jesus acts out of his love and care for people in need. And it would seem that this took quite some time because evening arrives, and the disciples suggest that Jesus sends the crowds away. This too is out of care for those in the crowd. They've followed Jesus away from the villages, away from sources of food and shelter. But Jesus says to the disciples 'They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.'

This is when we discover that five loaves and two fish is all they have. But that doesn't seem to worry Jesus. It's getting late, and people are hungry, and this would be barely enough food for Jesus and the disciples let alone a vast crowd. But Jesus doesn't send them away. Instead of commanding them to leave, he orders them to stay and sit down on the grass. They've followed him this far, even as he sought to be alone, and so Jesus attends to the physical needs of the people. They've heard his teaching, they've been fed spiritually on his parables about the kingdom of heaven. But here, they see this kingdom in action. The sick receive healing and the hungry receive food.

The multiplication of the fish and the bread remind us somewhat of the parable of the mustard seed that we had back in chapter 13. From such a small amount, a great deal of good is still done. 'They all ate and were satisfied', it says. Normally, a few small loaves and fish divided among so many people would provide each person with only a very tiny crumb. However, everyone ate to satisfaction and the disciples collected in leftovers more food than was originally available. God had provided for his people.

God providing for his people is such a strong theme through the scriptures. It should remind us to give thanks every day for our daily bread, and especially today as we receive Christ himself. In the meal of Holy Communion, we will receive enough. What might just look like a small bit of bread and sip of wine is, in fact, the kingdom of heaven coming to us. We receive Jesus. All of him. His forgiveness, his life, all for our good.

Perhaps, given the restrictions we've been living under, you feel very much like the hungry crowd in the wilderness eager to receive a miracle. The feeding of the 5000 in today's reading, and the manna in the wilderness in the days of Moses, and promises of God's abundant provision in Isaiah 55, and Psalm 132, and in First and Second Kings, all prepare us to expect good things from God. Jesus even called himself the bread of life. He is God's good gift to us, to sustain us in our time of need.

So, as we gather around the table of our Lord, we do so with eager anticipation. We come trusting in the promises of God. We come in faith, knowing that God has been faithful to those who have gone before us. We come, trusting in the words of Jesus: "This is my body given for you", "This is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." In this holy meal we receive the forgiveness Jesus won for us, we receive his eternal life, and we are strengthened to live out our lives of faith.

And so we also give thanks. We praise God that he has compassion on the lost and lonely. We praise God that he invites the broken and the shamed to his holy meal. And we give thanks as he invites us to this feast, which is a mere foretaste of the eternal heavenly feast to come. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.