

For some reason, quite unknown to any clergy I have ever spoken to, in the middle of the summer of this liturgical year B, in our cycle of readings, we switch from Mark's gospel to the reading of the entire 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's gospel and read about Jesus as the bread of life for 5 weeks. That's a lot of sermons on bread, and I know clergy who have told me they actually will schedule their holidays to avoid having to preach on bread for 5 weeks in a row! And that's only a slight exaggeration...

So last week began the first story from John Chapter 6. And if you were in church you would have heard the story of the miracle of the loaves and fishes.

While it's a pretty familiar story for most, it's good to get a reminder as we need to know the gist of it for this week's gospel reading to make sense. So, some 5,000 people had gathered together after following Jesus around, some came for healing, some to hear his teaching, some were his disciples and some no doubt out of curiosity. That's a lot of people, and as the day came to a close, they all were getting hungry. No fast food joints in those days! But one of the disciples came across a young lad who was smart enough, or maybe his mom was smart enough to have packed him a lunch—5 rolls and a couple of fish, and the boy was willing to share, so the disciple brought the food to Jesus, who blessed it, and from that the disciples fed the 5000 people til they all had their fill. And when all was said and done, there were still 12 baskets of food left over! After the meal, Jesus escapes the crowd by heading up the mountain. Why does he leave them? Because, John tells us, they were going to come and take him by force to make him king. Not really too surprising, if you give that a wee bit of thought. Here was a man who could multiply food at will to feed thousands! In a society where many lived hand to mouth, this ability would be a very valuable skill set indeed!

As evening approaches, Jesus and the disciples left and crossed the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum, but the people hadn't seen Jesus leave. So the next day when they couldn't find Jesus, they went looking for him and were surprised to find him on the other side of the sea. They expected Jesus to be where he was when they left him. And really, it's no wonder that they went looking for Jesus! It was breakfast time, and they were hungry. Jesus knew what was on their minds. And says to them: "I am telling you the truth: you are looking for me because you ate the bread and had all you wanted, not because you understood my miracles." (*vs 26 GNT*) Then Jesus tells them the purpose of his providing them with food the day before was so they would believe in him as the one sent by God to feed them—not just food for their bodies, but for their souls – for that is the food that brings eternal life. And, it is for that food—eternal life, that God wants us to work. "Well", they ask, "how does God want us to do that?" "Ah", says Jesus, "believe in me, I am the one God has sent for that purpose."

"Well, yes" they reply, "but it was Moses who gave us a sign that he was from God when he brought the manna to our ancestors", they told Jesus, "and that was quite clearly a miraculous sign, so what sign are you going to do to prove that they should believe who you are?"

Now, from our vantage point, looking at this story a couple of millennia later, having all the facts laid so neatly out in a story, it's easy for us to give a kind of internal snicker and think, how simple minded they were in those days, how could they miss the point the multiplying of all the bread and fish! It seems that they missed the subtleties of Jesus' message—the food he was talking was food to feed their souls; it is he, Jesus who will fill their hunger for spiritual food. And Jesus will fill our spirit so fully, more than we need, full to overflowing. This is a story of metaphors upon metaphors, and many missed the subtleties. And I think today we can still miss the finer subtleties, the deeper messages unless we're really listening for them.

But you know, often when we're in the middle of a something, a special event--and I would think being part of a crowd of 5,000 who all ate from 5 buns and a couple of sardines qualifies as a special event – or if we're experiencing a life crisis, or even just trying to survive the day to day drama of our lives, how often do we miss seeing God's grace in our midst? We're caught in the physical and emotional activity of the moment and just trying to get through it sometimes. So we can miss Jesus' touch, maybe in the caring gesture from a co-worker, a smile from a stranger, a co-incidence that came seemingly out of the blue. We can miss those subtleties, or just attribute them to happenstance. Then too, the reverse can happen, when we want God to clearly show us a path, like the crowd that demanded Jesus show them a sign to prove who he was, even though he has just fed 5,000 people. We want those signs to clearly point the way and then get upset or angry and maybe even lose a little bit of faith because it's just not happening the way we want it to, or think it should, and so, we think, God's really not there or not listening. We want Jesus to be right there when and where we want him to be, and provide us with what we're looking for how and when we think we need it. Like the group who was surprised because Jesus was where he was, because that wasn't where they had last seen him. And we don't get the answers from God or Christ when and how we have asked, well, we feel let down or disappointed! We too can miss the subtleties because we're not looking for them. The grace of God is present in our lives, in ways and means which we can miss, because we are expecting, or wanting something else, sometimes something more concrete. That doesn't mean Jesus is not there, or that prayer hasn't been answered—often it's answered in ways that we at first don't recognise. It's only later, often in hindsight, that we are aware that Jesus was there, with us, filling us spiritually. Yet in our busy-ness, we weren't aware that it had happened, and at the time we missed it.

Jesus understood exactly what the people really needed, spiritual sustenance. But they were still focused on filling their bellies. And they wanted to see clear proof, an easily read sign to help them believe that he was the one God send to bring the message of eternal life. He reminds them that it was not Moses who gave their ancestors manna during their desert crossing, but God who provided them the food; just as it was him, Jesus, who provided them with the loaves and fishes. But he had even more—Jesus could provide them with the food they needed to nourish their spirits—food for the life of their eternal souls. Then they get it, they understand the miracle of the loaves and fishes, so they ask for a regular supply of that food, and Jesus tells them it is he, he is the bread of life.

When we go to Jesus, he will fill our spiritual emptiness and we will never again thirst for spiritual fulfillment. Jesus is the source of our spiritual fulfillment, Jesus is the bread of life. More on that next week!

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