

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (7/12/20)

Hunger - it takes many forms. We all know the feelings of hunger that arise from our need for food. The emptiness, the longing, even the ache. The Church, in her wisdom, mandates a period of fasting before reception of Holy Communion. Partly to prepare the body as a clean vessel to receive the Eucharist, and partly to entice that biological hunger that provides us a physical representation of a deeper hunger that is within us. This deeper - more spiritual - hunger is sometimes apparent to us, and at other times we are blind to it. In the Gospel today, Jesus provides for the physical hunger of his listeners - but in doing so He points to the deeper hunger that they (and even his own disciples) were a bit blind to.

This feeding with food that Jesus does is actually secondary to the more important feeding that He was doing through His preaching. Filling the void in mind and heart with His words, filling their need for the presence of God with His own presence. However, He is not blind to the practical need for physical sustenance. Jesus understands our needs - spiritual and physical - being like us in all ways but sin. He has compassion on the crowd in their physical hunger as He does in another place when He looks out at a crowd moved with pity because they *were like sheep without a shepherd*. God looks to satisfy the longings of the whole human person - God provides us the things of the earth to use responsibly and temperately to satisfy bodily hunger - and in this miracle, demonstrates what else God provides and how he provides it.

It is impossible to not see the Eucharistic parallel in this scene - to fail to see echoes of the Last supper. Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks, breaks it and gives it to be distributed. He is looking ahead to what He will do at that Last Supper when He feeds with a food that directly nourishes the soul - the bread made into his own Body and Blood. In this scene with the multitude, Jesus feeds their void of mind and heart with His words, and He gives them food for the Body - his own presence is standing in front of the crowd, and the radiance of that presence showers grace upon all who are there. In the future it will not be so. He will not be there in the same visible form, He will not share with people words generated for the first time from the mouth of God, He will not project power and grace from the body in human form standing before them in this way. What he does point to by this miracle is more astounding.

Jesus shows that in the context of a meal He will nourish the spiritual hunger (that many are not aware of). During his Passion, He links the sacrifice of the cross to the meal of the Last Supper so that sacrifice and meal, nourishment and physical presence, all can be provided at once. In the context of the Mass we are nourished by the words of the savior (as he provided nourishment for mind and heart through his words), we are nourished by his presence and the outpouring of His grace in the Eucharist (as he once provided that presence by his earthly body), and we are reminded of the deep hunger within us as we partake of the fruits of his sacrifice in the form of earthly food. As we receive the Eucharist our bodily hunger from the fast is abated slightly to trigger within us the awareness of the feeding we are receiving on other levels - the spiritual food that nourishes soul and opens the heart to hear more deeply the words of the Lord in prayer.

There is one further twist to the story that should not go unmentioned. We hear that Jesus broke the bread and gave it to his disciples to set before the people. This further reinforces the role of the Church in Jesus' continued action of nourishing us. Jesus uses His Body the Church to preform the actions of nourishing. He, as eternal High Priest, is present in the faithful gathered, and embodied in those who have been configured to him by ordination; He speaks in the scriptures as they are read, and through the preaching as it is delivered; He transforms the bread and wine into His precious Body and Blood. In the Body of the Church we are gathered together in His name, we re-experience and participate in the sacrifice of the cross now eternally being offered for our sake to the Father in heaven. The Church sets the table before us, and as it receives the sacred (and very physical) presence of Jesus, it distributes it to the people who have come to worship. In the Mass, Jesus again is present to the crowd that has come to Him as he was that day on the hillside. He again provides food in superabundance so that no matter how many times we gather as a Church though all of history, the food does not run out (and, in fact, there will be some left over). In his compassion for those who have come to him He speaks, He feeds, He nourishes, He indeed opens a porthole to Heaven. Through the hands of disciples the Master's work is done - happy are those who are privileged to have all their hungers satisfied by such a feast.