

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC
August 2, 2020 - Streaming Mass
18th Sunday of Year A Mt 14:13-21

The apostles were certainly very practical, hard-nosed realists. They were always concerned with who ranked first and second and third within their small group. They took great care in preserving what they thought of as their franchise in carrying out the work of Jesus. They became upset when they found there were others, not part of their number, who were healing in Jesus' Name; they wanted a monopoly on His ministry. Or, they would occupy their time, in journeying from one town to another, thinking of ways that God might rain down destruction on their enemies.

In today's Gospel Jesus has been preaching for hours and the crowd has been hanging on His every word. John the Baptist is out of the picture; Jesus is now on center stage. The sky's the limit, they think; they have found the great Prophet who will save Israel, and they have the inside track. At the end of a very long day, their thoughts might have been, "Rabbi, that was really great; you had the crowd right where You wanted them. Let's wrap it up, call it a day, send them home so that they can get something to eat and we can all get some rest. Then Jesus asks the question that probably appears to them the most stupid possible. He says, "Why don't you give them something to do?" This kind of question doesn't make sense to hard-nosed realists like the apostles. After all there are more than 5000 hungry mouths to be fed. The Twelve respond with that depressing pessimism that so often characterizes their speech, "We only have five loaves and two fish." Of course, they're right, but, as we'll see, they're not right at all. Jesus, ever the one to see the possibilities present in the moment at hand, simply tells them to pass around what little they have, and somehow the multitude is fed. It is but one more example, albeit a very dramatic one, whereby the vision of Jesus will not be hemmed in by the narrow minds of His disciples

Let's take a look at ourselves to see what our own hard-nosed practicality and realism do for us. Let's take the apostles off the hook and see how often we speak very much like them. How often do words like "only" and "never" characterize our speech? "I am only a middle-aged divorcee; what skills do I have for the job market?" "I am not beautiful or handsome; who would ever want me?" "I have only a high school education; nobody is going to listen to what I have to say." "I'm only one small person; what can I do to change the system?" "I'm retired; I don't have the energy to get involved with that kind of thing." The litany could go on and on with all sorts of self-deprecating allusions; all variations on the same theme of "I only have five loaves and two fish." To talk or to think of ourselves in that way is to define ourselves by negatives, comparing ourselves to others by saying, "I am not like him or her." Of

course, I'm not that person and never will be, but then again he or she is not me with all my strengths, my abilities, my experiences. The differences between people should not imply superiority or inferiority. So often that "grass is always greener" mentality can lead to a jealousy of others, and to a lack of appreciation, even a depreciation of oneself, a sense of never feeling quite adequate to the task at hand.

Then there are people who try to compensate for those feelings of inadequacy by exhausting themselves physically, emotionally, or spiritually in trying to be or do better than everyone else in sight. For example, it's the waiter or waitress who has to carry five plates at a time, two on each arm, while balancing one on their head. It is the Super-dad or Super-mom, who has to direct every aspect of their child's life--his friends, what instrument she'll learn, what sport he'll play. It is the teacher whose class has to have the best penmanship, the tidiest room, the healthiest hamster, and the most money collected for the school raffle. It is the worker whose route or station has to be at the top of the production line every quarter. In short, it is anyone who isn't quite sure who they are on the inside, and so needs some endorsement from the outside, some kind of "gold-star", that will guarantee that he or she is indeed okay.

Today's Gospel is telling us to relax, to take a break from all of that. It tells that over-achieving part of ourselves that enough is good enough, when we are using that part of ourselves that is truly who we are, and not just that blind reflex, the automatic pilot, the programming of what we think someone else says we should be. Today's Gospel reminds us that God can indeed work miracles with just what we are, if we are willing to let God, and not our fears and fantasies, work in us. So long as we are content to recite our private litany of "I'm only;" so long as we are inclined to define ourselves by what others are and we are not; so long as we are content to wallow in self-pity, then all our worst-case scenarios will be proved true, because it is that kind of false "realism," constructed from a distorted imagination, that condemns us to repeat the past over and over again, or frustrates us in trying to attain some impossible ideal. How could things possibly be different, if we don't allow them to be?

Today's Gospel admonishes us never to sell ourselves short, never to underestimate what we are capable of being or doing, because if our efforts are directed in the way of Jesus, then we are never alone, and have a strength and a power greater than our own that is working with and for us and in us. In feeding the 5,000 Jesus works with very meager resources and a miracle results. In the same way, He can work with us, even those parts of ourselves that seem very limited indeed, and accomplish what our nervous, frightened imaginations would have thought impossible. In a few moments as we pray that the bread and wine be transformed into Christ's presence, let us pray also that we might be transformed by His working within us.