

Jesus Christ fed five thousand in the desert. It was after a long day of preaching, and it was actually more than five thousand: five thousand was just the number of men; women and children also were present. It was a great miracle, very much remembered through the early Christian tradition. But why did it actually happen? Why did Jesus feed all this crowd in the desert?

The story as it is told by Saint Matthew initially seemed to lead us in an opposite direction. Jesus wanted to be alone after the death of his relative and prophet John the Baptist. He did not invite the crowd to the desert. They simply followed him on foot when he was crossing the lake. He was kind to them when he saw the crowd; he preached, he cured the sick, and he let them stay late into the evening. Nobody expected any food from him. They did have a way to get food. As the disciples pointed out, there were villages around; they could go out there and buy food for themselves. So why did Jesus feed them?

There are modern traditions that try to explain the events at the desert. Some people say that Jesus knew that the crowd had some food hidden in their clothes, they just didn't want to share, so he taught them sharing. The message seems quite positive and almost "cute," except that it has absolutely no foundation in the Gospel. The disciples' report is terrifyingly precise: five loaves, two fish, period. Others see in this scene Jesus as one of the cynical modern Christian ministers who say that if you want to have people follow you, you have to have food at the meetings. Again, quite "cute," but it seems to go directly against the story of Matthew. Jesus was not looking for easy popularity, he did not want them to follow him to the desert this time. So why did he feed them?

Before we answer this question, let's ask ourselves a different question: why are they in the desert? This question is heavy with meanings: it brings to mind all the teachings of John the Baptist; it reminds us also of a famous speech by Jesus: "What did you come out to see?"; it directs our attention to the fact that Jesus was gaining popularity in the whole country. What this question leads to above all is a very fundamental and simple answer: they were looking for God. Taught by the example of John the Baptist and early miracles of Christ, the people realized that something divine was happening among them. They were looking for that Divine Presence. Their pilgrimage to the desert was in fact a quest for spiritual food. They were hungry, and they knew that material bread would not satisfy their hunger.

Jesus knows that. He understands their hunger. The apostles are misled by appearances: the late hour of the day, the shortness of resources, the vastness of the crowd. Jesus sees every human heart. Those crowds did not come out to the desert, did not abandon the safety of their houses, did not suffer the sun and thirst for the whole day just to get a free lunch. Jesus responds to their hunger in his own divine way. He tells the disciples to feed the crowds, knowing very well that material food is vastly insufficient. It is not material food that is being served today. Jesus reveals to the disciples and to the crowds how much God thirsts after his people. In this act of amazing generosity, God's encounter with human need and poverty reveals his nature -- he is love, which means he gives himself. God responds with a generosity

that bends the rules of nature because he is the one who never stops giving, and his gifts will never run out. The whole creation has to bow before the goodness of the Lord. An astonishing miracle: we can see God in his true self as the inexhaustible giver.

This is why Jesus fed the crowds. Rather than impress them with wonders and numbers, he offers them his heart. This encounter in the desert becomes the first of the signs that lead us to the total revelation of the identity of God. The signs that will slowly become fulfilled in His final gift of self on the cross, and His final gift of life in the resurrection. The signs that will remain with us forever as sacraments.