

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A-2020)
St. Patrick Church - Milford

When reading the account of Jesus' feeding of thousands with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish, it is easy to be swept up in the wonder of it all and miss the fact that Jesus was in mourning when he did this. John the Baptist had just been beheaded (a terrible death) at the hands of Herod, and Jesus had withdrawn to a deserted place by himself. Nevertheless, even there and even in his grief, his kindness would get the best of him. He felt bad that the vast crowd was hungry. He saw the need and he did not turn them away; "his heart was moved with pity," and, setting aside his own needs, he tended to theirs.

In an effort to humanly explain this great event (to demythologize it), some have suggested that those present were so moved by the generosity of Jesus that they shared what they had with the rest and that explains how all present were fed. Others suggest that the meal was a mere symbol and that it was the spiritual rather than the physical hungers of the people that were satisfied. I disagree and I believe these theories do not do justice to the story, which intends to report a supernatural event – a miracle.

Jesus' miracle, reminiscent of God's feeding of the Israelites in the wilderness in the Book of Exodus, also took place in a deserted place. Just as in the wilderness, those who gathered around Jesus entrusted themselves to his care, and they were not disappointed. Jesus' action also recalled that of Elisha, who fed 100 people with 20 loaves of bread in the Book of Kings. In both narratives, the servants (disciples) of these men of God point out the impossible nature of the situation, but are told to feed those present. In both accounts, the servants distribute the food and collect the leftovers. However, the fact that Jesus fed many more people with fewer loaves of bread affirms his status as greater than the prophets of old — a favorite theme in Matthew's Gospel.

In addition to the traditions of the exodus and the prophets, the Gospel of St. Matthew also alludes to the coming of the era of the Messiah, whose appearance had come to be associated with a time of peace and plenty. Despite the fact that they were in a deserted place, the people were invited to sit on the grass. Those who were waiting and hoping for a new shepherd-king-messiah of David's line were probably reminded of Psalm 23: "In green pastures he gives me repose" and "You prepare a table for me."

Jesus' actions on behalf of the people could also be interpreted as a prelude to THE GIFT OF HIMSELF as food at the Last Supper. Although the verbs "took," "looked up to heaven," "broke" and "gave" may have been used to get the connection across, it cannot be denied that, in retrospect, the earliest believers in Jesus understood that the loaves event anticipated the even greater event of Eucharist.

At every Mass, believing disciples are fed with the bread of the word and the living bread of Jesus himself. But, unlike every other food that we eat, the Eucharist gathers us in, and we are incorporated into Christ. In that sacred action, we are refreshed and renewed so we can recommit ourselves to Christ, to one another and to all the hungry poor ones whom we are privileged to welcome, to tend, and to feed.

As we remember this miracle event and let us remember to feed each other kinds words, words of support and encouragement, words of love, care and concern ... let us indeed become the bread - blessed, offered, and shared for the good of others.