

Mark 6:30-44, 53-56^{vii viii}

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure, even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men. When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces,

and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak;
and all who touched it were healed.

vii **About Mark 6:30-44, 53-56**

Today's gospel covers the return of the disciples to Jesus and then the feeding of the five thousand. Mark here uses the term "apostle" for the only time. It is not the official title that it becomes in Luke and Acts, but a simple reference to those sent out on mission (6:7).

The theme of rest recalls the entry into the promised land (Deuteronomy 3:20, 12:10, 25:19; Joshua 1:13) and is associated with the image of God as the shepherd of Israel (Ezekiel 34:15; Psalm 23:1-2). This image of the throng like "sheep without a shepherd" (v. 34) also echoes the Old Testament (Numbers 27:17; 2 Chronicles 18:16; Ezekiel 34:5).

The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels. The themes of wilderness, eating and bread recall God's provision of manna for God's people (Exodus 16; Numbers 11). Elisha also, like Moses, provided food for many (2 Kings 4:42-44). Such abundance was expected at the coming of the Messiah who would gather God's people to the banquet table (Isaiah 25:6-8, 49:10, 55:1-2). Thus Jesus was fulfilling both the law and the prophets. The absence of the usual report of the crowd's response to Jesus' act makes clear that the emphasis lies not upon its miraculous nature but upon its revelation of Jesus' true significance.

In the early Church, the Eucharistic significance of the feeding made it one of the central memories of Jesus' ministry. The actions described—taking, blessing, breaking, giving—and their order—are the same as for the institution narrative of the last supper (14:22a). The word for "broken pieces" (v. 43) is used in the Didache, an early second-century Church manual, for the bread broken at the eucharist and at the agape meal. The feeding thus foreshadows the last supper and the anticipated messianic banquet in the kingdom of God (14:25).

viii **Reflection and Response**

The story of the miraculous hillside picnic with the gracious host in command contains much food for thought. How deeply significant is Mark's simple sentence: "They all ate and were satisfied." With compassion, Jesus saw the

multitude "like sheep without a shepherd," and he bade them to sit down in that green pasture to be rested and fed.

The scripture implies that a great spiritual hunger had brought the crowd to Jesus, for "he began to teach them many things," until it grew late. He had very likely told this people that God loved each of them and that the gates of the kingdom were open to all. Whatever human condition was their own, they were not beyond God's care and acceptance.

Whether or not we believe the details of this story, the good news is it makes us expectant and hopeful that Jesus can always satisfy our needs in abundant and sometimes inexplicable ways. We are not prone to be puzzled by good fortune, (somehow we think we deserve it) and so may sometimes miss an important sign in an unexpected blessing. Neither the great throng nor the disciples seemed to understand the mysterious multiplication of the loaves and fish at the time. That which was given for the people's needs became more adequate under the Lord's blessing. Never can we hesitate to donate our little in the face of an overwhelming need.

Jesus said to his disciples, "You feed them." They found what little food was available and brought it to him. The resources seemed absurdly inadequate but the increase of the small supply was God's doing. Whatever we offer to the Lord, whether of our material or spiritual resources, can be multiplied to surprising proportions.

The event on the hillside is a prefiguration of the messianic banquet to which all people may come to eat the bread of life. This bread, broken for us, is enough for all at present, with much left over for future throngs.

The miracle of the loaves points to the greatest miracle of all, which is described later in Ephesians. There were no "dividing walls" at the feeding—no barriers of legal, social or religious foundation. The multitude sat at Jesus' feet, looking to him to fill their need. Jesus was a son and teacher of Israel, the first people to whom God was revealed, the first people entrusted with God's oracles and ordinances. We, the Gentiles, know ourselves to be those who were far off, "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel," and "separated from Christ" in the beginning. But his peace has come for all. He is the one who unites all the families of the nations. Through him both Jews and Gentiles have access to the Father.