

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

[*Isaiah 55:1-3; Psalm 145; Romans 8: 35, 37-39; Matthew 14:13-21*]

In recent weeks we have been receiving reports of a surge in the number of people infected by the coronavirus in various parts of the world. There would be a variety of reasons for this, but one among them, often highlighted by media reports, is crowds. On our television screens we see many images of large gatherings of people on beaches, in parks, or at house parties, who are not bothering with physical distancing or masks, and thus seem to be united in disregard for the seriousness of the disease and the way it is spread. These crowds are evoking strong reactions. They are leaving many people shaking their heads in disbelief and civic leaders voicing immense frustration.

Reaction to a crowd is at the heart of the Scripture passages we have heard this morning. The text from St. Matthew's Gospel recounts a large gathering of people, and the reaction of Jesus to it. Those who gathered were united in the experience of need. This is a signal to us that this account not only pertains to the crowd of over two thousand years ago but also is directed to people of every generation. We all experience need and limit. While we may want to separate ourselves from the crowds gathering today on beaches and in parks in defiance of the virus, St. Matthew is inviting us to draw very near to the crowds of old at the Sea of Galilee, and understand ourselves as part of that vast number and recipients of the Lord's saving response to human need. The Gospel passage is teaching us that, just as the Lord reacted to the crowd in Galilee, he responds to the "crowd" that we form with humanity today.

So, let's look carefully at the scene as Matthew presents it. The crowd, we are told, is hungry and in a deserted place. There is nothing there to satisfy the hunger. Furthermore, we learn that some of the people are sick. At that time, most illness was far beyond any human capacity to cure. The experience, in other words, is of need and helplessness. It is precisely here that we recognize ourselves. We are creatures, fashioned by God and, therefore, radically dependent upon God for the very gift of existence, completely reliant upon God's providence for all that is truly necessary to sustain our lives. We, too, in virtue of our humanity, are needy and helpless. Apart from the saving help of God, the human heart finds itself in a deserted place, evacuated of anything that can truly satisfy its deepest needs and longings.

From a boat on the lake, Jesus sees the crowd in its need, and reacts. Matthew highlights two aspects of the Lord's response that are important to recognize. First, Jesus responds out of profound compassion. It is a beautiful glimpse into the divine heart of our Lord. He is always moved by human suffering to respond with pity and love. Second, Jesus takes charge of the situation. Faced with enormous difficulties and challenges, we often wring our hands, not knowing what to do. Jesus *does* know what to do; Jesus always knows what to do. On the lakeshore, he goes to the sick and heals them. He directs the hungry crowd to recline, he calls for the meagre amount of loaves and fish, he multiplies the food, he directs the disciples to distribute it and then to collect what is left over. Jesus knows what to do and he acts.

How does this speak to us, right now? In faith we know that, from his place in heaven, Jesus, the Risen Lord, casts his gaze upon the vast crowd that is suffering humanity today. He is looking upon us in our need and he knows what must be done for the anguish to be healed. As we

continue to ponder the sacred text, though, we begin to see that, although there are many things we do share in common with the ancient crowd, nevertheless humanity today differs from it in a significant way. We can recognize this from one particular detail of the Gospel scene. At the Sea of Galilee, the disciples and crowd did what Jesus told them to do. When it comes to the commandments of the Lord, indifference and disobedience seem to be the more frequent response in our day. The modern mindset leans far more heavily toward self-reliance than dependence upon the goodness and providence of God. Where this is the case, we have more in common with the defiant crowds of the beaches and house parties than we do with the people who accepted the direction and care of the Lord.

As our civic officials react to what they are witnessing in the careless gatherings, their most frequent response is along the lines of: What don't you get? How loud and how often do we have to tell you how serious this is? When we consider the other two Scripture passages, we can hear the Lord asking us something very similar.

At those times when we feel we can turn away from God, make it on our own and choose to go after things that accord with our desires, not God's will, we hear the Lord saying through Isaiah: What don't you get? "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?" Why can't you accept that only I can satisfy your hunger and thirst for the fullness of life? Or whenever in the face of great difficulty we give in to worry or despair, whenever our neediness and our helplessness leave us anxious, we hear God saying through Saint Paul: How often and how loud do I have to speak? Can't you get it into your heads that I love you and can take care of you, that there is no hardship, however great, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation," that can separate you from the love I have shown you in Christ Jesus? What don't you get?

When Jesus alighted from the boat as it came ashore, he, the Son of God made flesh, moved by divine compassion, stepped directly into the human situation of need and limit with a power possessed by no one else to heal and satisfy. The same Jesus, now the Risen Lord, steps with the same power into our condition of want and dependence through the sacrament of the Eucharist, the great mystery symbolized and foreshadowed by the miraculous feeding of the multitude. Just as the ancient crowd came to where they knew Jesus would be found, we, too, in our day, must likewise come to where he has told us we can encounter him: here at mass. Whether through our physical presence or via livestream, let us come today - and often - to this most sacred of all venues to receive from Jesus that which he alone can give: the healing of our souls, direction and support for our lives, and the food that more than satisfies with the gift of eternal life.

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