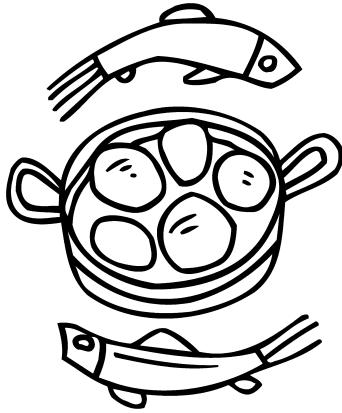


YEAR A - THE YEAR OF MATTHEW

# THE HOLY GOSPEL

PENTECOST 7 JULY 31, 2011



*The Holy Gospel is according to St. Matthew the Fourteenth Chapter.*

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

**N**ow when Jesus heard the beheading of John the Baptist, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. 14 When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. 15 When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away

so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." 16 Jesus said to them, "**They need not go away; you give them something to eat.**" 17 They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." 18 And he said, "**Bring them here to me.**" 19 Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. 20 And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. 21 And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

*This is the Gospel of the Lord.*

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

Sermon - July 31, 2011

Year A – The Year of Matthew – Pentecost 7

Isaiah 55:1-5; Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

This Gospel reading begins with an ugly announcement: Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, the one who went before him to prepare the way, is dead. Both John and Jesus had started their ministries as courageous young men with prophetic voices proclaiming God's kingdom, calling people to repentance, inviting them to hear the good news of the Father.

Now John is dead at the hands of an immoral, weak king and his family. After hearing the terrible news brought to him by John's disciples, Jesus withdraws to be alone. One would assume he wanted time to be alone in order to grieve and to pray. This much we can guess, from the previous story on John's murder and the beginning of today's Gospel.

Had such a tragedy happened to one of our close friends or cousins, our first emotion, even more powerful than grief at such a time, would be fear. "We have been involved in the same kind of ministry," we would think. "We have called out the sinners, the corrupt and the hypocrites. We know what happens to prophets who tell the truth." We would be afraid that death was also knocking at the door for us.

We can begin to imagine what Jesus might have felt after the death of John, but when it comes to fear, we have to rethink.

Jesus was the one who always greeted his frightened friends with, "Do not be afraid." We can recognize in Jesus emotions that we have experienced; but fear, maybe or maybe not. What is evident in Jesus after the death of John is a sense of urgency. With the death of John the Baptist, a new chapter in the holy history has begun. Jesus will soon set his face toward Jerusalem and to the cross.

However, he will not do so just yet.

When Jesus comes back from his time alone, he sees crowds of people who have followed him and are hungry for his words. He sees them, and as the Greek says in one powerful verb, he feels pain for them right down to his very "guts."

First, Jesus makes the people whole. Jesus cures those who are sick. As the other gospels show when they tell this same story, Jesus gives them the good news of God by teaching them. They are so riveted by him that they forget everything else. Twilight falls and they are still there as they have been all day long, men and women, together with children who are beginning to get restless and hungry.

The gospel writers vary on who first noticed the failing light and the need for food – Jesus or his disciples – but the need is noticed. The disciples wanted Jesus to make an announcement; something like this: "Now, good people, you must go to the nearby villages to find food. We have no food here, so go in peace and take care of your own." However, as usual, Jesus surprised them. He said to his disciples, "You give them something to eat." Not the general imperative, "Give them something to eat," but the specific "You give them something to eat."

We can hear the voices of the disciples as they protest, "We do not have any food, Lord. The baskets are empty; the food pantry is bare. We cannot feed so many people. Do you not see? It is physically impossible. Look, all we have is five loaves of bread and two fish, and there are nearly five thousand people here."

We recognize the panic. We have been there. If you have ever felt overwhelmed by anything, be it work, a responsibility, a commitment, or an expectation someone has of you, then, you know what the disciples were experiencing. Generally, our response is either, "What me," or "Why me?" "We cannot do it all, Lord."

However, the Lord accepts no excuses. "Bring me what you have," Jesus says, and

when they bring the meager resources to him, Jesus does what the disciples have seen him do before; he blesses the food.

On that stretch of land near the Sea of Galilee, a miracle occurred; all were fed.

I have been to that spot. There is an ancient church where the floor is covered with an equally ancient mosaic of loaves and fishes. I was told that almost as soon as the miracle occurred, and possibly, while Jesus was still alive, the place near the sea became a place of pilgrimage.

There was something in the miracle of the loaves and fishes that captured the imaginations of people, and they wanted to be in the place where it happened. There is something about the bread, fish, and the feeding of those people that grabs hold of the mind and heart.

I suspect that in part, it is because Jesus takes what overwhelms the disciples, and makes a miracle of it. I think it is because we can so readily understand the sense of impossibility that overcame the disciples, and how Jesus was able to turn it around. Furthermore, there is something else. We may not consciously perceive it, but this is an image of confession and forgiveness, sin and absolution, death and resurrection.

God in Christ takes what we have, blesses it, and works his goodwill through this blessing. God wants us to be fed. He wants us to be whole. He wants us to be nurtured. Remember Jesus' words at the very beginning of his ministry, "Man does not live by bread alone, but by the very word of God."

Jesus sets an example for his church in this act of feeding the five thousand. The living Christ wants us to take what we have and what we are and offer it all to the Father. It does not matter how little it is, no matter how meager our resources are, or what sins and weakness blots our past and present. God wants us to bring it all before him so that he might make us more than the limits by which we confine ourselves. When it comes to the needs of his people, God will not take no for an answer.

First, we bring our weakness to the altar, saying, "We cannot do it, Lord. It is too much for us to do." "I am too sinful." "I am too weak." "There are not enough of us." "We are just a little country church." "We cannot do it, Lord."

Then, we answer his question, when he asks, "How much do you actually have?" "Well, very little, five loaves and two fish."

"Bring it here," he says. "It is enough," and Jesus blesses it. Then, wonder of wonders, we discover, yes, it is enough.

"All ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full." Jesus wanted the people to be fed when he gave this miracle.

However, in giving this miracle, he also gave to us a metaphor by which we may see ourselves. We come before Christ helpless, hungry, and in need of blessing and food that comes from the very Word of God. I suspect that, for this reason, people continued to return to this field even after the baskets of bread had been carried away.

It is enough and more than enough, the gospel tells us. This is the good news. Thanks be to God. Amen.