

31 July 2011 St Michaels Studio City
A Proper 13
Matthew 14.13-21

Feeding The Crowds
The Rev. Canon Mark Shier

I love the story of God in Jesus feeding a huge crowd of hungry people, the one we just heard in today's gospel. I love it because of what it says about the compassion of Jesus and His willingness to act on behalf of people He doesn't even know. I love it because it tells not only of the natural feeding of thousands on that Galilean hillside but points to the supernatural feeding of billions throughout time in the Christian communion service, a meal just as effective as that ancient hillside one. It is the same impulse of God, to meet the needs of His children. The early church must have loved this story, too, for it is re-told in all four of the gospels – different details, to be sure, but the same story, all the same.

Hunger is not for us the same pressing ache that it is in parts of Africa, Asia, and South America. There people die of their hunger; here we are merely uncomfortable. We are blessed to have such abundance in our nation, blessed to be able to share our abundance with others in the world. I just wish we were more generous: there is such desperate need in the world and we waste our abundance on needless wars and bloating the treasuries of soulless corporations. But I do give thanks that our people, for the most part, do not experience the desperate hunger of other parts of the world. But our hunger can be sharp enough to know the great relief in having it satisfied. It is enough to feed our compassion, if we let it: compassion – the word comes from two Latin words, *com* meaning with, *passio* meaning suffering, so compassion is suffering with others. If our compassion were greater, we would be more willing to share what we have with those who have not. Let us pray for compassion, for ourself, for our neighbor, for our church, for our nation, and for all the other peoples of the world who have enough to share with those who have less than enough to live.

I think that is part of the meaning of the feeding of all those thousands of women, children, and men on that hillside two thousand years ago. Let's imagine ourselves into the scene, shall we? We're part of the crowd. Look around us. The important ones for what is about to happen are the women. Men may go out of the village into the countryside to hear a great teacher without preparing something to eat along the way, but women never would. These are mothers, after all, and their children are along with them. So they have simple food, enough for a little for their families, probably some bread and dried fish too, not enough to feed the whole crowd. And, of course, there are always those who never prepare, who are always dependant upon the foresight of others. What effect would the wondrous generosity of the Teacher have on these women? He takes five loaves of bread and two fishes – these women know that isn't nearly enough to satisfy twelve disciples let alone thousands of others – yet with utter confidence the Teacher thanks God for Her generosity and then begins to break up the food and hand it out. What magnificent trust in the power of God! The wonder of it is that the food does not run out. As hands eagerly reach for a bit for themselves and for their

children, those loaves and fishes are inexhaustible. What effect would that abundance have on those whose prudence has prepared a bit of food for the journey? Surely it would be to bring out that food, too, to give it to their families, and perhaps even to share it with others in the crowd, since there is such a grand source of abundance also meeting the crowd's hunger. So, in my mind's eye, I see the need of all being met with the generosity of God encouraging the generosity of the human – men, women, and children who not only receive but are invited into the privilege of giving.

There are some biblical commentators who see the miracle of that feeding of the thousands only in this liberated human generosity. I don't interpret the story that way. I am fully prepared to see God acting in a miraculous way through Jesus to make up the deficit in what is needed. I think those five loaves and two fishes really were stretched in some inconceivable fashion to meet the needs of the hungry. This has to be part of what Jesus is teaching, that God will provide, perhaps in ways that we cannot now imagine. But it adds tremendously to my understanding of the story's meaning to see God's generosity inviting the crowd's generosity. We may be the objects of God's goodness, as we all surely are; we are ones that God does things for. But we are also called to be actors in the story, to take our part in passing on the generosity.

Here is where the story takes up even more power for me. I can trust God's generosity to meet my needs but I will be invited to become a giver, too. After all, says the Old Testament book of *Genesis*, you and I are made in the image of God, we are made like God. If God is generous, so must we be generous. So the story is a simultaneous call to trust God for the hungers in my life and to give out of my own treasure to those who need. Here is where God in His Christ calls to modern men and women, to you and me. We are to receive, but we are also to give. I think that responsibility is not only a personal one, for each and every Christian, but also a corporate one for the various communities we belong to. It certainly is a call to our Church; it is why in this parish we have a weekly ingathering of food for the homeless; it is why the churches in the Los Angeles area under the leadership of our bishop give money, goods, skills, and training to other parts of the world in such desperate need, a giving echoed in the next step up through our national church. Such giving at all levels of Christian organization are the reason we are such shameless beggars, why our church comes to you and me and even total strangers and asks for our money, time, and talent. It is so we can feed the hungers of humanity in whatever ways they are presented to us – not only physical hungers but spiritual hungers as well. It is just as important as filling a belly to tell that belly's owner that he or she is a child of God, beloved beyond all imagining, saved by God's love on the cross, having an honored place in God's plan for the world, an eternal destiny right alongside the queens and presidents, generals and ceo's, the rich and famous, the talented and the wise.

And though I believe devoutly in the separation of church and state, I believe it is right and legal to lobby our government at all levels to use governmental resources for relief of human need in our nation and around the world. Meeting the needs of others is what good Christians do, as the feeding of the thousands shows. (It is also, by the way, what good Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and other religionists do in response to their own theologies of mercy,

compassion, and human need.) Such mercy and generosity is also good governmental policy for the welfare of the people of this nation. It is good to eradicate disease around the world so that we might live in health and safety; tuberculosis, malaria, AIDS, polio, influenzas, and other diseases know no national borders or limits. It is a good way to combat terrorism to raise the living standards of the poor around the world, not the only way, but part of the solution. It is good to address how we can plan for and help all of humanity deal with the sickness and hunger that is going to come from global warming and environmental pollution. All of this is how we can be generous with the resources that we have, to add them to God's grace and good will for the salvation of the world.

Jesus will feed the crowds but only with our help. Would we have it any other way?