

A Sermon for The Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 14, 2010

The Rev. Stephen C. Scarlett

We are just past the midway point in Lent. The 4th Sunday in Lent is, thematically, a sort of respite. It is called “Mothering Sunday,” after the epistle. There is a tradition in England of calling your mother today. It is also called refreshment Sunday after the gospel. Those who are buckling under the weight of the fast can take comfort. It is all downhill from here!

Our gospel (John 6:1 f.), the feeding of the 5000, is a central biblical story. All the gospels tell us how Jesus fed the multitudes, and some tell us he did it twice. The feeding miracles remind us of the pattern of a rightly ordered life, the pattern of faith.

St. John tells us that Jesus led the crowd to a remote place. There was no food and no one had brought lunch, except for one young man who had five loaves of bread and two fishes—one does wonder just how willingly he surrendered them!

In any event, the supplies were inadequate. This is symbolic, for the supplies of life are always inadequate. To be sure, we sometimes have enough money and food. But it always seems that something is lacking. We may feel lonely and need companionship. We may be hurt and need comfort. We may be sick and need healing. We may want to do something that we are unable to do.

Human nature is chronically discontented. We always need, or want, more than we have. We always look at the available resources—physical, emotional, relational—and want something else. If this weren’t so we would all be contented, and our prayers would sound much different.

The key to the story is what Jesus did with the inadequate supply. He gave thanks to God for it. We are so used to hearing this story that we miss how strangely different this way of dealing with crisis is. Ask yourself, when was the last time you thanked God for supplies that did not meet your needs? When was the last time the available resources were not sufficient and you said, “Blessed are thou, O Lord God, Creator of heaven and earth”?

Old Testament Israel did not do that. God led Israel into the wilderness, into a place where there was not enough food. Israel did not take what God gave and offer it back to God with thanksgiving. Israel murmured. The people wanted to know what kind of God would lead his people into such a place. This is why God said, “Forty years long was I grieved with this generation, and said, It is a people that err in their hearts, for they have not known my ways, unto whom I swear in my wrath, that they should not enter into my rest” (Psalm 95).

But Jesus took the loaves and gave thanks. Jesus took the inadequate supply in the wilderness and offered it to God in thanksgiving. Then, by God’s power as creator the inadequate supply was made sufficient to meet the need, with much left over.

This is what we are supposed to do. We are supposed to take what God has given us, however much or little it is, and offer it back to God in thanksgiving. This is the central point of the tithe. When we

offer our lives back to God in faith, life is rightly ordered, God's blessing descends and God provides enough to meet our needs—and more.

However, because of sin this is not what we do. Because of sin, we do not offer what God has given us back to God in thanksgiving. Instead, we pursue created things without reference to God. We strive to acquire and accumulate more; we pursue satisfaction of our desires on our own terms; then we worry whether we will have enough and become fearful that we might lose what we have. This is the root of human discontent. We seek satisfaction in created things apart from God. Since they were not meant to satisfy us, we are never satisfied. We are always discontented.

The answer is to repent and return to a rightly ordered life. The answer is to begin to offer all of life back to God in thanksgiving, and trust God to provide for us. We are able to do this “in Christ.” Jesus took the life God gave him and offered it back to the Father. In Christ, we offer ourselves, our souls and our bodies—and all that God has given us—back to the Father through him.

This is what the church does in the Eucharist. We come to offer the creation back to God in and through Christ. We come to connect the offering of ourselves with his perfect offering. Our offering is inadequate, for we are sinners. We come with needs that are not met and desires that are misdirected. Yet, we are able to offer ourselves to God through Christ and his cross, for we are sanctified by him. And we receive back from God the body and blood of Jesus, the bread of life, the medicine of immortality. We discover that in Christ we have enough to meet the need. In him we are full and contented.

The Lenten fast teaches us this. We do not go without food and pleasures because they are bad. We go without them to detach ourselves from them and to remind ourselves that they are not the ultimate things, to remind us that “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Deuteronomy 8:3, Matthew 4:4). Through prayer, God fills the void created by the fast. We discover that we are okay without the things. As Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35).

It is a lamentable fact of our fallen condition that we learn to trust God more through deprivation. That is why God took the children of Israel through the wilderness, where there was nothing, before he gave them the promised land, the place that flowed with milk and honey.

The lesson of the wilderness and Lent is to learn not to murmur when there is not enough. The lesson of the wilderness is to take the inadequate resources of life and offer them back to God in faith with thanksgiving, and he will make them sufficient to meet our needs.

As we learn this new pattern, faith replaces doubt. God's peace and joy replace the anxiety and fear that come from the world. And we learn to be content. As St. Paul wrote,

I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content...I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:11-13).