

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 26, 2006

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In the gospel today, Jesus solves a problem that he himself created. A crowd of people followed Jesus up a mountain—what we would think of as a foothill. It was, perhaps, around mid to late afternoon. The people were hungry and the mountain setting was distant from any source of food sufficient to feed five thousand.

Jesus led the people to this deserted place on purpose in order to reveal himself to them as Lord and Creator. Taking a small amount of food, he multiplied it by his prayer of thanksgiving so that it became sufficient to satisfy the appetites of all who were present.

St. John tells us that the context of the miracle was Passover. This setting is meant to call to mind the Exodus, the first Passover and the subsequent feeding miracle performed by God through Moses (Exodus 16, Deuteronomy 8:3, cf. John 6:30f). God led Israel to a desert place where there was no food so that he might miraculously feed the people with manna from heaven.

This biblical pattern is repeated in each of our lives. God leads us to places where there is not enough of what we need. Sometimes we are led to a place where physical needs are not met. Sometimes we are led to a place where emotional needs are not met. Sometimes we are led to a dry place where nothing seems to satisfy us. God leads us to empty and dry places in order to reveal himself to us as the source of genuine fulfillment.

When we are full of the things of this world, we are often distant from God. The things of the world are deceptive. They fill us on one level, but they do not fill the soul. The error of fallen man is to think that his discontentment results from a lack of some additional thing. Thus, he continually searches for the next thing, which, he thinks, will finally satisfy him. God leads us to the place of lack to get us to look beyond the physical things and find fulfillment in him.

Jesus explained the point of this feeding miracle in the extended discussion that follows it in chapter 6 of John's gospel. His main point is summarized in John 6:35. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never hunger, and he who believes in me will never thirst."

We experience this in the Eucharist. The body and blood of Jesus Christ nourish the soul in a way that an ordinary meal cannot. We experience this in the life of prayer. As we pray, as we read and study the Word of God, as we live day-by-day in communion with the Father through Son in the Holy Spirit, we are sustained by force, a power, a means of sustenance that surpasses any merely physical means of nourishment.

Of course, we have legitimate physical and emotional needs. Fallen man pursues the physical without thought for God. But redeemed man is not meant to pursue the physical without any thought for the physical. A rightly ordered life finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ and trusts him to provide the physical things that are needed—i.e. "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33).

But we are tested in this life. Part of the test is that we do not always have all the things we desire.

We are being prepared for eternal joys and part of the preparation is that we are called to suffer some absence of fulfillment in time. Life is meant to be a kind of wilderness test. The words that Moses spoke to Israel apply to us:

You shall remember that the Lord your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not (Deuteronomy 8:2).

In the wilderness, we learn the secret that less can be more. Lacking some desired things, we turn to Christ and find all that we really need. As St. Paul wrote to the Philippians,

I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content...Everywhere and in all things 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. (4:11-13).

We are now in the Lenten wilderness, but we look forward to Easter and the feast. The wilderness is not an end in and of itself. It is a means to the end. We enter the wilderness to prepare for the Promised Land. We fast so that we might be ready for the feast. We long for that celebration where both body and soul will be filled, where the redeemed, cleansed from all idolatry and covetousness, will partake of God's creation with thanksgiving and joy.

As the prophet Isaiah wrote, "The LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow... He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces" (25:6-8).