

Seeking Satisfaction

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: In this morning's Gospel reading, we encounter a group of people who are seeking the Lord Jesus – which normally you'd think of as a good thing; but in this case, it's not. It is the morning after Jesus fed a multitude to the point of complete satisfaction starting with only five loaves of bread and two small fish. There, on a deserted portion of the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, the crowd watched in amazement as he turned a young boy's lunch into a feast for thousands. They were so impressed with Jesus – and more specifically, with the possibilities he inspired in their imaginations – that they determined to make him their king. But Jesus didn't want any part of it. He had no intention of becoming their "bread king" and becoming the monarch and head baker of a kingdom whose national motto would be "*Is it time to eat?*" So, knowing what they were planning to do, Jesus withdrew alone to the desert hills east of the lake. But before he left, right at nightfall, he instructed his disciples to get into their boat and cross back west over the Sea of Galilee to the city of Capernaum. Then, after sending them off, he went up into the hills to be alone for prayer and meditation.

Now, the crowd was watching all of this. They saw the disciples leave in the boat, and they saw Jesus head up into the hills. And they thought to themselves, "Perfect! He's staying here with us. In the morning, when he comes back down, we will honor him with our praises and we will pledge him our undivided loyalty. He, in turn, will surely consent to lead us and take care of us. It'll be great. Jesus will give us everything we need: food whenever we want it, and as much as we want. It will be like the dawning of a new age. We're all going to live happily ever after in prosperity and peace." They had it all worked out; and I imagine that on some level they truly believed that this was the proper way to receive and honor the Lord Jesus.

At sunrise, they gathered at the foot of the hills to await his return. But he didn't come back down as they expected. They probably stood in silence for a long while, listening only to the increasingly louder grumbling sounds of their now once-again-empty stomachs. After a while they would have started whispering among themselves about what might be delaying him. At length, after they grew impatient, they surely would have started calling for him and sending people out to find him and fetch back; but it wouldn't have done any good: he wasn't there anymore. As it turns out, Jesus had left the area. During the hours of darkness, he had caught up with his disciples in the boat by walking out on the surface of the sea. I'm sure you remember *that* story: how the disciples were afraid when they saw Jesus walking on the water; and how he eventually got into the boat and completed the crossing with them to the other side. The action in this morning's Gospel lesson takes place a few hours later, when some of the disappointed crowd finally catches up with Jesus back in the city of Capernaum.

I think it's safe to say that they are a little miffed. Their question, "When did you get here?" reveals a touch of anger. They're not happy because Jesus is not playing the game according to their preconceived notions. They want Jesus to follow their agenda. They don't want to get on board with his. And what they really want to know is "Jesus, why did you leave us out there, all alone and hungry? Can't you see that we are your devoted followers? Why aren't you treating us the way we think you should?"

In response to this, Jesus cuts straight to the heart of the issue. He tells them that they are not really interested in him or his message: all they really want is another free meal. They want their temporal needs satisfied again. That's all – and that's a pity. Jesus had spent the entire day yesterday teaching them from the Scriptures. He had been opening their minds to the limitless spiritual nourishment found in the Word of God. The miracle he did with the loaves and fishes was meant to be much more than simply a way to feed them. It was a sign to them. It was meant to show them what he was doing with them spiritually: how he was expanding and multiplying their understanding of the Scriptures. He was taking the well-known passages that didn't seem like so much on the surface (as insignificant as a little boy's lunch) and showing how they were all about him and his mission to give his life for the world, and how that is food to always satisfy their hungry souls. But now they were focusing on the miracle, not what it meant. So Jesus directs their attention back to

his message and mission. “Don’t strive for the bread that perishes”, he tells them, “set your heart on the bread that will give you eternal life.”

“Okay”, they reply, “*That* sounds good. We want bread that gives eternal life. What do we have to do to get it? What work is involved?” It’s a fair question. Ever since the fall into sin, getting enough food to eat has been hard work. “By the sweat of your face you shall eat your food,” God had told Adam, and certainly their experience confirmed it. The crowd figures that if regular bread takes a lot of work to get, this bread Jesus speaks of must be even harder to obtain. They want to know how much harder.

“Believe in me,” Jesus tells them. “The work of God is to believe in the One he has sent.” And it’s interesting that Jesus calls this the “work of God”. Obtaining faith in Jesus really isn’t something people can do. Rather it’s God’s work to create and strengthen faith in people. A person is the recipient of God’s work when he has faith in Jesus, just as the day before these people had all been recipients of bread that God made for them. They didn’t have to do anything except hold out their hands. That’s all they have to do now and by his Word he will feed them.

But strangely enough, that’s the sticking point. They are willing to accept food without working for it – but not the food that will give them eternal life. *That* they want to work for. So, they shift their focus back down to the lower level of reality. “Well, okay,” they tell him, “we’d like to believe in you, Jesus; but we can’t. We need you to give us a sign. And it will have to be a pretty good one. Let’s see ... use our imaginations a bit here ... oh, wait, we’ve got it! The Scriptures say that Moses gave our forefathers bread from heaven to eat. You do that and we’ll believe in you.”

Their transparency here is remarkable. They are like career alcoholics at a skid row mission who grumble about having to endure a sermon and a prayer before they get served their soup and bread. The bread of heaven that has the power to change them and give them a new life in time and eternity falls on deaf ears. All they want to do is eat – and in the case of this crowd, see miracles too. And their suggestion that seeing this miracle would help them believe is manifestly false. They all saw the same miracle the day before, yet they admit that none of them will believe in him unless he does it again. And if he did do it for them again, they’d be impressed all over again; but by this time tomorrow they’d be right back where they are today: empty stomachs and even emptier, faithless hearts – still seeking to be satisfied by another miracle and another meal.

It’s pretty sad, really. They’re just like their ancestors in today’s Old Testament lesson. Those folks had, just a matter of weeks before, witnessed all the mighty miracles of salvation the Lord used to bring them out of Egypt. They saw the plagues. They participated in the Passover when they were spared by the lambs’ blood while the firstborn of Egypt died. They passed safely through the Red Sea that opened up for them – can you imagine anything as impressive as that? And then they saw it cover the armies of the Egyptians who were after them. If anyone ever had proof of the Lord’s power and the great lengths to which he was willing to go to save his people, it was these folks. And yet here they are a short time later when their food supplies are running a little low complaining about how good they had it as slaves in Egypt, and how the Lord only brought them out here in the desert to kill them by starvation. “What a mean guy the Lord is. Oh, if only he’d killed us in Egypt! Then at least we’d have died with full stomachs.”

Pathetic. It’s hard to imagine how the people in either of these lessons we’re talking about could be so shallow and faithless. Despite all they’ve seen and heard, as soon as they experience a bit of discomfort all faith is out the window. All they want is immediate satisfaction. That’s all the people seeking Jesus want. “Feed us. Take care of us. And then you can be our king.” The unspoken implication is “As soon as the going gets a little tough, you can’t be our king anymore.” That’s not faith. It’s exactly the opposite of faith. Faith is believing in things that cannot be seen. It’s the trust that hangs on to Jesus and his promises of salvation when the circumstances are tough – even when they get desperate – *even* when they lead to suffering and death because faith in Jesus is largely about what he’s going to do for us after we die.

And though I hold up these people as examples of faithlessness, I don’t do it so we can see how much better we are. Instead I hold them up as mirror so that we can see ourselves in them. It often happens that our devotion to the Lord Jesus and our trust in him is just as fleeting and fickle as theirs. We have to admit that

we often seek him primarily for what we perceive he will give us in the short run and in the process neglect the far more important spiritual gifts that he wants to give us.

Now it's true that few if any of us are worried about not having food to eat. In our day and age, especially in this country, we don't live the hand to mouth existence that the people of the first century did. For most of them, even in a good year there would be periods of hunger; and in a bad year, they might very well face starvation. So, naturally, they were preoccupied with food. It's what they thought they needed to be satisfied. For us, it's usually something else. It may be something material: a better house, a remodeled room, a new car ... we all have our lists of what we think it would take to satisfy our material needs. But it doesn't have to be material. It may be something about ourselves: I'd like to be thinner, more athletic, healthier, younger, older, more intelligent, better skilled, who knows what else? It may be a family thing I want improved: parents who are less critical or restrictive, a spouse who makes more money or who is more attractive, children who are better behaved. In our culture, the pursuit of pleasure usually trumps all else: we want to be entertained.

In these and in other ways, we long to be satisfied – and there is nothing wrong with that in itself. The trouble occurs when our desire to be satisfied with these temporal sorts of things becomes our primary focus – when working toward them becomes the main goal while our spiritual needs are set on the back burner. And we are all guilty of this from time to time. Worse, there are times when we may make the satisfaction of these temporal sorts of needs a condition of faith. “Lord, I will believe *if* you give me such and so” or conversely, “Lord, I won't believe in you if you don't.” We've already seen that such devotion is mercenary at best, and ultimately dishonest. A faith that is built upon material or temporal things is really no faith at all – it only lasts as long as your “stomach” (or whatever other hunger you have) is satisfied for the moment.

That's why Jesus wants us to make our main focus the bread that he gives us. Through his Word and his teaching, he communicates himself: his love for us, his life for us, and his death on the cross and his resurrection for us. That's the bread of life from heaven: his body and blood given for the life of the world. This is what will fill our souls and give life and eternal satisfaction. With them Jesus satisfies our thirst for the forgiveness we need, he feeds our faith, and he fills us with his own love and the desire to live in true devotion to him.

We also find that when we make the bread of life that Jesus gives our main focus, the temporal needs we have will pale in significance. Paul wrote, “I know it means to have little, and I know what it means have a lot. But I've learned the secret of being satisfied whether hungry or well fed.” His secret was knowing Jesus and the power of his Gospel, that's the bread of life from heaven that gives life to the world.

That our faith be true and our devotion sincere, may we always pray: “Lord, from now on give us *this bread*”, for that is a prayer he delights in answering. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!