

THE PROVISION OF THE LORD

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, 2011

On the Text: Propers for the Day

By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

The Three Pillars of Lent are Almsgiving, Fasting, and Prayer, which makes it a little funny how often the Gospel lessons are concerned with eating outside of fasting. The first two Gospel lessons for Lent, those of Ash Wednesday and the First Sunday in Lent, are really about fasting: How to fast, and then Jesus' Fast of 40 days in the Desert, respectively. But then, in the next two Sundays, the Second and third Sundays in Lent, images of food and eating sneak in.

In the Gospel of the Second Sunday in Lent, on the surface, the subject seems to be whether Jesus will heal the demon-possessed child of a woman who happens to be a Gentile. This woman is sometimes called the Syro-Phoenician woman because the region of Tyre and Sidon is the ancient region of Phoenicia in Syria. The story turns out to be one in which Jesus teaches the disciples that He came to bring the Gospel of Salvation to the Jews first; but there is the implication that if, or when, they reject it, that He will then turn and give it to the Gentiles. In the conversation with the woman, Jesus speaks of taking the "children's bread and casting it to the dogs" Her reply to that, "Yet the little dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." gave Archbishop Thomas Cranmer the inspiration for the Prayer of Humble Access. At that Jesus grants her request.

Food and eating are not mentioned in the Gospel for the Third Sunday in Lent until the end of the passage when a woman in the crowd cries out, Luke 11:27 ["Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts at which You nursed."](#) This might seem to be a little bit of a stretch, but fasting is not mentioned anywhere. Rather, what is mentioned is the source of Jesus nourishment as a baby.

And now, today, our Gospel lesson is the story of the feeding of the Five Thousand. All four of the Gospels contain a version of this story. From five barley loaves and two small fishes, 5000 men and an untold number of women and children were fed. As for a description as to how much the people ate and how they felt after they had all eaten, Sts. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all say the same thing: [Matthew 14:20](#) [20 and they all ate, and were satisfied.](#) St. John's description is slightly different and is mixed in with the distribution of the food and the gathering of the scraps: [John 6:11-12](#) [11 Jesus therefore took the loaves; and having given thanks, He distributed to those who were seated; likewise also of the fish as much as they wanted. 12 And when they were filled, ..."](#) The idea we are to get is that all of the people ate as much as they wanted; and when they were filled up, they were satisfied. That is certainly not a description of Fasting and raises the question, "Why is this passage from John a Gospel Lesson for Lent? Indeed, why?"

The simple fact is that the purpose of Lent is not to teach us to endure the deprivation of things we like or to learn how to go for long periods without food. Lent has a far more important and deeper purpose, which is to help us to come closer to God in all respects so that we may

truly understand and appreciate what Jesus did for us on the Cross and how He wants us to live. This entire story is full of examples that show us the proper life of a Christian.

The story begins on the west side of the Sea of Galilee at a time near to the Passover, so it could have been at about this time of year. They were near, but not in the city of Bethsaida. If we read all four accounts of this miracle, we find out that Jesus and the Apostles had taken a boat to get there and that they had done that in order to be alone together after learning of the death of John the Baptist. The problem was that the people's hunger for Jesus' teaching was so great that a great multitude followed him on foot. That would have been around the north side of the Sea of Galilee from Capernaum across the Jordan to Bethsaida and then some distance farther, perhaps five miles or more. St. Matthew tells us that Jesus' desire to be alone with the Apostles was thwarted by this, that when the boat got to the western shore, there was a great multitude waiting for them. What did Jesus do? He taught them and healed the sick, but as evening came on, He became concerned about them. The Good Shepherd is concerned about His sheep.

In our Gospel account from the Gospel of St. John, Jesus used the situation to teach the Apostles a lesson. I say Apostles rather than Disciples here because that is what the Scripture calls them in at least two places. St. Matthew and St. John call them Disciples at this point, while St. Mark and St. Luke call them *Apostles*. St. John never uses the Word, *Apostles*, anywhere in his Gospel. St. Mark and St. Luke also call them "the twelve" shortly before this story, so we know who it was that Jesus wanted to be alone with.

In this story, there are at least three things to be learned. First, thousands of hungry people get fed, probably at least 10,000. Second, those who witnessed the miracle of the multiplying of the loaves and fishes up close, the Apostles and those in the crowd nearest to Jesus saw the bread and the fish broken and put into baskets, which were at first, most likely not filled; but when the baskets got to the people and they began to be served from them, the baskets never ran out of food, just like the bowl of flour and the jar of oil in the house of the widow of Zarephath when Elijah stayed with her during a famine as told in 1 Kings 17. Third, those who thought Jesus was the Messiah might have connected this to the prophecy in Isaiah 25:6 which says: [Isaiah 25:6 6 And the LORD of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; A banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow, And refined, aged wine.](#) There was no wine mentioned here, nor were there choice pieces with marrow and fatness. However, those who were there might have made that connection anyway after Jesus rose from the dead because of what is said in the next three verses of Isaiah's prophecy: [Isaiah 25:7-9 7 And on this mountain He will swallow up the covering which is over all peoples, Even the veil which is stretched over all nations. 8 He will swallow up death for all time, And the Lord God will wipe tears away from all faces, And He will remove the reproach of His people from all the earth; For the LORD has spoken. 9 And it will be said in that day, "Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; Let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation."](#) Those who were there in that upper room on the night in which He was betrayed, who heard Him say, ["This is my Body ..."](#) were also there by the Sea of Galilee that day when He took the Bread and the fish, looked to Heaven and blessed them, and broke them before

multiplying them to be given those who were there that day. There were some who were fed spiritually with that Bread, and some who were not. One old Anglican commentary sees the Feeding of the 5000 as, “quite simply the Lord’s Supper by the Lake-side.”

If you read on in John 6 past the end of our lesson at verse 14, you will find that some went back across the lake to Capernaum where they found Jesus. In John 6:25-26, there is this interesting exchange: John 6:25-26 **25 And when they found Him on the other side of the sea, they said to Him, "Rabbi, when did You get here?" 26 Jesus answered them and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled.** These people were interested in Jesus, not because of his teachings, but because he satisfied the hunger of their stomachs with no effort on their part. These were people who did not understand Moses’ words from Deuteronomy 8:3 which Jesus quoted to Satan in the desert: Matthew 4:4 **It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.** Nonetheless, this story is an illustration of how the King, the Lord, provides for His people. Not even the Apostles could have seen the sacramental nature of what Jesus did that day until that Supper in the Upper Room.

One other thing we see in this story is that the Apostles acted as Jesus’ Deacons as servants and almoners bringing sustenance to those who at that time had none. They carried the baskets that never ran out of food; and at Jesus instructions, they picked up the scraps that were left over.

Jesus taught the people **before** He fed them; but then He did feed them. First He fed their minds and hearts; then He fed their bodies. Anyone who has ever taught in a classroom knows that people are seldom interested in learning much when their tummies are full; they’d rather sleep. We have already looked at those whose only interest was in being filled with bread. There are a lot of things that have to be done in just the right order or the results don’t turn out to be very good. Consider the process of taking a shower. Taking off your clothes and then taking a shower generally produces a desirable result. However, if you take the shower before taking off your clothes, the result may not be what you had hoped for.

This lesson is from the beginning of one of the most spiritually nutritious chapters in the Bible, John 6. The 5000 men, plus women and children are fed from an amount of food that could easily be carried by one person: five loaves and two small fish. The Apostles and some of the people learn something from this, but the Apostles can’t seem to remember the lesson they learned. As I said much earlier, all four Gospels have a version of the story of the Feeding of the 5000. St. Mark has it in chapter 6:32-44. But only two chapters later, in chapter 8:1-9, St. Mark has the story of the Feeding of the 4000, which is followed by a typical little dust up with the Pharisees, after which Jesus and the disciples get on a boat again; and the disciples begin to worry about something ridiculous. Here is how St. Mark describes that incident:

Mark 8:13-21 **13 And he left them, got into the boat again, and went to the other side. 14 Now they had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. 15 And he cautioned them, saying, "Watch out; beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." 16 And they began discussing with one another the fact that they had no bread. 17 And Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why are you discussing the fact that you have no bread? Do**

you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? 18 Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? 19 When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" They said to him, "Twelve." 20 "And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?" And they said to him, "Seven." 21 And he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?"

Do you not yet understand? Do we not yet understand? Why do we not yet understand? Maybe, just maybe, we need to find the answer to the question, "Why did they not yet understand?" before we can understand why we don't understand. But to find that out, it would help if we knew just what it was that they didn't understand. What they didn't understand was that not only was Jesus in fact the Messiah, but that He was even more than that; that He was not only the Son of God; He was, and is, God. Why didn't they know those things? It wasn't because they were just dumb old fishermen. Few, if any of them were at His Baptism, and only three of them were invited to accompany Jesus up on the mountain to witness His Transfiguration, which occurs after the Feeding of the 5000. The seminal event was the Gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost – to the disciples and also to the whole world. Suddenly, on that day, they all understood just who Jesus was, and is and what He wanted them to know and do.

The question then is: What's **our** excuse? Why are we, computer literate, 21st century sophisticates having a harder time of it than a bunch of dumb old fishermen. For the same reasons they did, that's why. We don't want to let the Holy Spirit, of whom St. Paul says our bodies are temples, rule us, at least not while we are on this earth. We try to keep the Holy Spirit in a small corner of our hearts because we are afraid of how it might change us if we were to yield ourselves completely to God. They had the evidence right in front of them and could not see it. We have the distilled evidence from a cloud of witnesses right in our hand in a book called the Bible. We already know it is the truth, the written Word of God, that bears witness to so many things God has done, from Creation to the Resurrection and Ascension of His crucified and formerly dead Son.

I titled this, The Provision of the Lord, in a deliberate *double entendre*. Jesus is the Lord, and He provides for us and sustains the world and us. But God the Father provided Jesus for us in order that we might be saved to become His brothers and sisters. God through the Holy Spirit also provided the Bible for us that we might read it and have our souls fed. Jesus fed the physical bodies of the 5000 and the 4000 and healed many others in acts that were great miracles. The Bible has fed the spirits of many millions in modern miracles. Reading the Bible should be a regular, day-to-day activity and not just something we should do during Lent.

How can we learn to understand what God wants us to understand?

That's easy. Read it and be filled.

AMEN