

Pentecost 8 / July 18, 2021

Mark 6:34

“When He went ashore He saw a great crowd, and He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd and He began to teach them many things.”

Compassion is often linked with pain. We feel compassion when we sense another person's pain on an emotional level. Compassion is to feel pain ourselves, because of someone else's pain. Jesus felt compassion for the people in our gospel. He saw they were like sheep without a shepherd; lost, vulnerable to danger and hungry. He fed their bodies but His primary emotional engagement was not with their physical needs, but with their spiritual needs. Because they were sheep without a shepherd, He taught them many things. Their religious leaders were not tending to their spiritual needs, not providing them with the nourishment of God's word.

Instead, they burdened them with human rules, demands and regulations. He knew this in His mind. He felt pain in His heart. Jesus was Himself hungry and tired, but His compassion compelled Him to stop and nourish them with God's word. Jesus feels compassion for our deepest spiritual needs. Jesus nourishes us with His word, the good news of God's grace and forgiveness received through faith in Him. Jesus feeds us with His word that we may have life with Him in time through faith and have the fullness of life in eternity, in body and in spirit in His resurrection.

Jesus did two things in our gospel. He taught the crowd and fed them with five loaves and two fish. However, the teaching seems but a prelude to the feeding of five thousand, which seems the main event. The number may have been double or triple five thousand. Mark mentions only men, but probably women and children were present as well. Feeding more than five thousand people from five loaves of bread and two fish was a great miracle and worthy of remembrance. Nevertheless, physical hunger was not what evoked Jesus' compassion. Jesus felt compassion, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. His first response was to teach them. Physical hunger was secondary to the need for spiritual nourishment from God's word. Human beings do not live by bread alone, but by the word of God.

God's word empowers our daily bread to nourish our bodies. God's word enables our bodies to use daily bread for our physical benefit. Jesus' miracle highlights what God does for each of us and for all creation, daily by the power of His word. A miracle is not an impossibility. A miracle is something that happens every day, in super-concentrated form. A miracle highlights something God does daily, which we often overlook, because it happens so often. A miracle is an extraordinary act in the sense that it is something God does all the time, compacted into a single event at a certain time and place. A magnifying glass concentrates the sun's rays in a single spot. The effect is powerful heat. A miracle concentrates something God does every day, so we appreciate His power. God feeds the whole world daily. Jesus shows that He is God and that His word is powerful, by concentrating that energy into a powerful event in which more than five thousand people are fed, so that we see that He is our God and Saviour and that His words have power to give us life in time and for eternity.

Jesus is a miracle! He is the infinite, all powerful, eternal God, whom heaven and earth cannot contain, concentrated in human flesh. Feeding five thousand from two fish and five loaves of bread was a miracle. But the greater miracle was that God stood among humans as a human being, felt physical pain for their spiritual hunger, and stopped to nourish their souls with the food of eternal life. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.”* These people were hungry and thirsty for God's righteousness. They wanted to be fed! Jesus fed them. When they were filled, He also addressed their physical hunger. And He did it in such a way that they would know He was God was with them and He felt compassion for them.

Compassion is an important part of Jesus' revelation of God. Ancient religions had little if any conception of compassion on the part of their gods. The gods of the ancients were anything but compassionate. They demanded sacrifices from human beings, before they would send rain and cause the earth to produce food. If you wanted to eat you had to pay! They demanded cruel sacrifices from human beings, including human sacrifices, especially children. Greek philosophy, which greatly influenced Christian thinking in the past and continues to affect modern Christian thought, had no conception of compassion in God. In the perfection of His being, the god of the philosophers felt no pain and was completely oblivious to human suffering. In Jesus we see God in a different light. Jesus shows us God's compassionate heart. In Jesus we see that God feels for our pain, cares for our physical needs. God cares especially for our deepest spiritual need, to be nourished with His righteousness and to be fed with His word that gives the fullness of life in time and for eternity.

Are you hungry? It's a blessing to feel hungry. Hunger reminds us we need to eat. We will starve to death, if we don't eat! It's a blessing to feel spiritual hunger. We don't experience spiritual hunger in the same way as physical hunger. We don't forget our physical hunger, but we can overlook and neglect our spiritual hunger. A few hours after a meal, our stomachs ache and growl. It's not that way with spiritual hunger. We might feel guilty when we realize we haven't read the bible, worshipped or received communion for a long time, but we aren't going to get a head ache, or a sore belly. If it came down to a choice between nourishment from the word or a buffet, we would probably choose the buffet first and the word after we ate our fill. But the finest food won't restore a dead body to life, or preserve life when physical functions are shutting down. We live first and foremost in our spirits and our spirits need the nourishment of God's word to live.

The first thing Jesus did in our gospel was teach the people God's word. Jesus consistently put the needs of the spirit before the needs of the body. Both are important, but the nourishment of the spirit is first in importance. Without the spirit the body is dead. Jesus visited the home of Martha and Mary the sisters of Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead. Jesus came for dinner, but first He taught. Martha busied herself in the kitchen preparing the meal. Mary sat at Jesus' feet and listened to His teaching. When Martha complained that Mary wasn't helping in the kitchen, Jesus said Mary had chosen the better part. We live not by bread alone, or primarily by the food of the earth. We live by the words that proceed from the mouth of God. His word empowers daily bread to nourish our bodies. His word enables our bodies to receive nourishment from daily bread. His word nourishes our spirits so that He may give us life body and spirit, in time and eternally in His resurrection to a new life.

The miracle of the bread and fish highlights Jesus' divine power and focuses our attention on what God does every day, in providing bread for our bodies and nourishment for our spirits. Every day God feeds the world from the bounty of the earth, the righteous and the unrighteousness, out of the compassion of His heart. The Psalmist sang, *"The eyes of all look to you and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing."* Every day God provides the world spiritual nourishment in the gospel of His love and forgiveness; proclaimed by the voice of the church, received through faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour. He is the bread of life. He gives forgiveness and life to all who receive nourishment through faith in His name.

Jesus refreshes us with forgiveness in the water of our baptism. He calls us daily to come and drink freely of the waters of forgiveness! Jesus feeds our spirits through the gift of His body and blood in Holy Communion. In this miraculous meal He offers Himself for our spiritual healing. He gives us the Holy Spirit. He nourishes our spirits and provides us a foretaste of the feast to come, when He will feed us in the banquet of eternal life. The miracle of the bread and the fish highlight Jesus' divine power and underscore His compassion, expressed fully in His death on the cross for our forgiveness and healing; soul and body, in time and for eternity. In Jesus' Name.
Amen