

CHRISTIANITY VS EVERYMAN FOR HIMSELF

ISAIAH 55:1-5

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MATTHEW 14:13-21

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JESUS HAD JUST RECEIVED TERRIBLE NEWS

His kinsman and precursor had been murdered. To make matters worse, Herod had John beheaded as a sort of party favor for his daughter. He killed a Prophet of God to please his daughter, to appease her mother, and to save face with his peers. All this had taken place at a lavish banquet entertaining both the rich and famous of Galilee and important emissaries from the Emperor of Rome. Such was the world in which Jesus lived.

UPON HEARING THE NEWS, JESUS WITHDRAWS FROM THAT VIOLENT WORLD.

He goes off into the wilderness. Perhaps Jesus remembers the last time he had set foot there, the time when Satan had tested him three times. Perhaps he remembers when his ancestors had

been in the wilderness. They too had fled a world of violence. They too were tested in the wilderness.

This time however it will not be Jesus who will be tested. This time he goes into the wilderness to grieve for his friend and to pray to God, both for comfort and for guidance.

His disciples follow him; that's what disciples do.

A large crowd of men, women, and children follow also, although their motives are not clear. Are they fleeing Herod in fear and disgust? Are they searching for an alternate world in which to live? Do they expect Jesus to react in some powerful way to John's death, perhaps raise a guerilla army to strike back at Herod? Are they miracle hunting? What are they looking for?

JESUS LOOKS UP FROM HIS PRAYER.

He sees thousands of lost sheep, sheep in need of a new shepherd. His compassion moves him to act. He sees the sick and heals them. He hears the cries of the hurting and consoles them. He senses the bewilderment of the puzzled and enlightens them. The crowd, totaling over 5,000 men plus women and children, hang on his every word. They lose track of time; it grows late; they hadn't planned on staying all day, and so they had not

brought any food along. There was but one Boy Scout among them. He, however, was only prepared for himself and his family.

THE DISCIPLES SEE THE PROBLEM.

They come to Jesus with their solution: "This is a lonely place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food *for themselves*." It was the ancient version of the advice given by Captain Smith of the Titanic to his crew when they had done all they could, "It's every man for himself now, God bless you." The disciples are asking Jesus to pronounce the benediction and dismiss the crowd, leaving them to fend for themselves. Such is the wisdom of the world: it's everyone for himself, or herself as the case may be.

BUT JESUS LIVES IN ANOTHER WORLD.

His world is governed not by the wisdom of the world but rather by what Paul referred to as the "foolishness of God". "They need not go away," Jesus tells his disciples. "In fact it is much better that they remain here with us. Ours is not a world of "everyman for himself". Ours is a world of compassion, community and

shared burdens. I rule in this world and you are my disciples. You give them something to eat.”

Now it is the disciples’ turn to be tested in the wilderness.

Like most of us, they see the problem clearly but not the solution. They survey the meager fare of the prepared Boy Scout and note that it is grossly inadequate. They cast puzzled looks at Jesus and shrug their shoulders. They have much to learn before they will pass their discipleship test in the wilderness.

JESUS IS FORCED TO GIVE THEM THE ANSWER.

“Bring them here to me.” What does he mean by “them”? The loaves? The fish? The hungry crowd? All of the above? Jesus is giving his disciples lesson one in discipleship. “When faced with a situation for which you lack sufficient resources, bring them to me. Point them to God”.

Jesus takes the food and blesses it. He probably would have used the prayer he was taught at mother’s knee, “Blessed art Thou O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth food from the earth.” Perhaps he also added “give us this day our daily bread.” In other words Jesus pointed the disciples to God, the One from Whom all blessings flow. Perhaps he reminded them of how this same God had fed their ancestors in the wilderness

when their resources were nil. With that, he handed the bread and fish to the disciples.

THE TWELVE HAVE JUST LEARNED DISCIPLESHIP LESSON NUMBER 2.

Their task is to bring the blessings secured by Jesus from God to the world. Their task is to pass on Jesus' compassion to the crowds. Their task is to build community. Their task is to act in faith and hope.

What happened next remains shrouded in the penumbra of mystery. All we know is that the disciples started out with five loaves and two fish and ended up with twelve baskets of leftovers! The twelve baskets might have reminded the more biblically literate among them of what was gathered up by the elders in the wilderness during the time of Moses after God fed them with the bread come down from heaven. Perhaps all this came to the disciples' minds later when they sat down with Jesus for that last supper and watched him break bread and share it with them once again.

SO WHAT IS MATTHEW TEACHING US 21ST CENTURY DISCIPLES THIS MORNING?

The feeding of the five thousand is a mustard seed event. Like that parable it points to the coming Kingdom of God. The kingdom begins small like a mustard seed but ends up sheltering the world.

- This feeding proclaims that in Jesus' alternate world, in the Kingdom of God, there is room for everyone and there is more than enough food for everyone.
- This event proclaims that it is in community not in individuality that we survive and prosper.
- This event proclaims that our major problem is not insufficient resources but hardness of heart and amnesia of the mind; we forget the One Who is the source of all blessings and the blessings He has given us in the past.
- This story proclaims that our function as the Church of Jesus Christ is to take the world's problems to Jesus and share his answers and his gifts with the world. That is the Priestly function of all us disciples.

WE ARE ABOUT TO COME TO THE TABLE OF THE LORD.

Like that feeding long ago it points to the past and to the future. This meal looks back to Moses and the wilderness when God fed and protected His people. It looks back to Jesus on the night before he died. It looks forward to the Messianic Banquet, when all of God's people will sit together in peace, a peace that is secured by God's compassion that welcomes us all and provides for us in abundance.