



## Fourth Sunday in Lent; John 6:1-15

### The Feeding of the 5000

*After these things Jesus went over the sea of Galilee, which is the sea of Tiberias. And a great multitude followed him, because they saw his miracles which he did on them that were diseased. And Jesus went up into a mountain, and there he sat with his disciples. And the passover, a feast of the Jews, was nigh. When Jesus then lifted up his eyes, and saw a great company come unto him, he saith unto Philip, Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat? And this he said to prove him: for he himself knew what he would do. Philip answered him, Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may take a little. One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, saith unto him, There is a lad here, which hath five barley loaves, and two small fishes: but what are they among so many? And Jesus said, Make the men sit down. Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. And Jesus took the loaves; and when he had given thanks, he distributed to the disciples, and the disciples to them that were set down; and likewise of the fishes as much as they would. When they were filled, he said unto his disciples, Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost. Therefore they gathered them together, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves, which remained over and above unto them that had eaten. Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world. When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain himself alone.*

### I. THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND

I. In today's Gospel Christ gives us another lesson in faith, that we should not be overanxious about our daily bread and our temporal existence, and stirs us up by means of a miracle; as though to say by his act what he says by his words in Matthew 6,33: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." For here we see, since the people followed Christ for the sake of God's Word and the signs, and thus sought the Kingdom of God, he did not forsake them but richly fed them. He hereby

also shows that, rather than those who seek the Kingdom of God should suffer need, the grass in the desert would become wheat, or a crumb of bread would be turned into a thousand loaves; or a morsel of bread would feed as many people and just as satisfactorily as a thousand loaves; in order that the words in Matthew 4,4 might stand firm, that "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." And to confirm these words Christ is the first to be concerned about the people, as to what they should eat, and asks Philip, before they complain or ask him; so that we may indeed let him care for us, remembering that he cares more and sooner for us than we do for ourselves.

2. Secondly, he gives an example of great love, and he does this in many ways. First, in that he lets not only the pious, Who followed him because of the signs and the Word, enjoy the food; but also the slaves of appetite, who only eat and drink, and seek in him temporal honor; as follows later when they disputed with him at Capernaum about the food, and he said to them in Jn 6, 26: "Ye seek me, not because ye saw signs, but because ye ate of the loaves," etc., also because they desired to make him king; thus here also he lets his sun shine on the evil and the good, Mt 5,45. Secondly, in that he bears with the rudeness and weak faith of his disciples in such a friendly manner. For that he tests Philip, who thus comes with his reason, and Andrew speaks so childishly on the subject, all is done to bring to light the imperfections of the disciples, and on the contrary to set forth his love and dealings with them in a more beautiful and loving light, to encourage us to believe in him, and to give us an example to do likewise; as the members of our body and all God's creatures in their relation to one another teach us. For these are full of love, so that one bears with the other, helps and preserves what God has created.

3. That he now takes the five loaves and gives thanks etc., teaches that nothing is too small and insignificant for him to do for his followers, and he can indeed so bless their pittance that they have an abundance, whereas even the rich have not enough with all their riches; as Ps 34, 11 says: "*They that seek Jehovah shall not want any good thing; but the rich must suffer hunger.*" And Mary in her song of praise says: "*The hungry he bath filled with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away.*" Lk 1, 53.

4. Again, that he tells them so faithfully to gather up the fragments, teaches us to be frugal and to preserve and use his gifts, in order that we may not tempt God. For just as it is God's will that we should believe when we have nothing and be assured that he will provide; so he does not desire to be tempted, nor to allow the blessings he has bestowed to be despised, or lie unused and spoil, while we expect other blessings from heaven by means of miracles. Whatever he gives, we should receive and use, and what he does not give, we should believe and expect he will bestow.

## **II. THE ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION**

5. That Christ by the miraculous feeding of the five thousand has encouraged us: to partake of a spiritual food, and taught that we should seek and expect from him nourishment for the soul, is clearly proved by the whole sixth chapter of John, in which he calls himself the

bread from heaven and the true food, and says: *"Verily, verily, I say unto you, ye seek me, not because ye saw signs, but because ye ate of the loaves, and were filled. Work not for the food which perisheth, but for the food which abideth unto eternal life, which the Son of man shall give unto you."* Jn 6,26-27. In harmony with these words we will explain also this evangelical history in its spiritual meaning and significance.

6. First, there was much hay or grass in the place. The Evangelist could not fail to mention that, although it appears to be unnecessary; however it signifies the Jewish people, who flourished and blossomed like the grass through their outward holiness, wisdom, honor, riches etc., as Isaiah 40, 6-7, says: "All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, because the breath of Jehovah bloweth upon it; surely the people is grass." From the Jewish people the Word of God went forth and the true food was given to us; for salvation is of the Jews, Jn 4,22. Now, as grass is not food for man, but for cattle; so is all the holiness of the outward Jewish righteousness nothing but food for animals, for fleshly hearts, who know and possess nothing of the Spirit.

7. The very same is taught by the people sitting on the grass; for the true saints despise outward holiness, as Paul does in Phil 3, 8, in that he counted his former righteousness to be filth and even a hindrance. Only common and hungry people receive the Word of God and are nourished by it. For here you see that neither Caiaphas nor Annas, neither the Pharisees nor the Scribes follow Christ and see Christ's signs; but they disregard them, they are grass and feed on grass. This miracle was also performed near the festive time of the Jewish Passover; for the true Easter festival, when Christ should be offered as a sacrifice, was near, when he began to feed them with the Word of God.

8. The five loaves signify the outward, natural word formed by the voice and understood by man's senses; for the number five signifies outward things pertaining to the five senses of man by which he lives; as also the five and five virgins illustrate in Mt 25, 1. These loaves are in the basket, that is, locked up in the Scriptures. And a lad carries them, that means the servant class and the priesthood among the Jews, who possessed the sayings of God, which were placed in their charge and entrusted to them, Rom 3, 2, although they did not enjoy them. But that Christ took these into his own hands, and they were thereby blessed and increased, signifies that by Christ's works and deeds, and not by our deeds or reason, are the Scriptures explained, rightly understood and preached. This he gives to his disciples, and the disciples to the people. For Christ takes the Word out of the Scriptures; so all teachers receive it from Christ and give it to the people, by which is confirmed what Matthew 23, 10 says: "For one is your master, even the Christ," who sits in heaven, and he teaches all only through the mouth and the word of preachers by his Spirit, that is, against false teachers, who, teach their own wisdom.

9. The two fishes are the example and witness of the patriarchs and prophets, who are also in the basket; for by them the Apostles confirm and strengthen their doctrine and the believers like St. Paul does in Rom 4,2-6, where he cites Abraham and David etc. But there are two, because the examples of the saints are full of love, which cannot be alone, as faith can, but must go out in exercise to its neighbor. Furthermore the fishes were prepared and cooked; for such examples are indeed put to death by many sufferings and martyrdoms, so that we

find nothing carnal in them, and they comfort none by a false faith in his own works, but always point to faith and put to death works and their assurance.

10. The twelve baskets of fragments are all the writings and books the Apostles and Evangelists bequeathed to us; therefore they are twelve, like the Apostles, and these books are nothing but that which remains from and has been developed out of the Old Testament. The fishes are also signified by the number five (Moses' books); as John 21,25 says: "Even the world itself would not contain the books that should be written" concerning Christ, all which nevertheless was written and proclaimed before in the Old Testament concerning Christ.

11. That Philip gives counsel as how to feed the people with his few shillings, and yet doubts, signifies human teachers who would gladly aid the soul with their teachings; but their conscience feels it helps nothing. For the discussion Christ here holds with his disciples takes place in order that we may see and understand that it is naturally impossible to feed so many people through our own counsel, and that this sign might be the more public. Thus he lets us also disgrace ourselves and labor with human doctrines, that we may see and understand how necessary and precious God's Word is and how doctrines do not help the least without God's Word.

12. That Andrew pointed out the lad and the loaves, and yet doubted still more than Philip, signifies the teachers who wish to make the people pious and to quiet them with God's laws; but their conscience has no satisfaction or peace in them; but only becomes continually worse, until Christ comes with his Word of grace. He is the one, and he alone, who makes satisfaction, delivers from sin and death, gives peace and fulness of joy, and does it all of his own free will, gratuitously, against and above all hope and presumption, that we may know that the Gospel is devised and bestowed, not through our own merit, but out of pure grace.

13. Finally, you see in this Gospel that Christ, though he held Gospel poverty in the highest esteem and was not anxious about the morrow, as he teaches in Matthew 6, 34, had still some provisions, as the two hundred shillings, the five loaves and the two fishes; in order that we may learn how such poverty and freedom from care consist not in having nothing at all, as the barefooted fanatics and monks profess, and yet they themselves do not hold to it; but it consists in a free heart and a poor spirit. For even Abraham and Isaac had great possessions, and yet they lived without worry and in poverty, like the best Christians do.

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