

03/22/20

*Laetare*, 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent

**Our Savior nourishes us to set us free**

**John 6: 1-15**

1) After these things Jesus went over the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. 2) Then a great multitude followed Him, because they saw His signs which He performed on those who were diseased. 3) And Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat with His disciples. 4) Now the Passover, a feast of the Jews, was near. 5) Then Jesus lifted up His eyes, and seeing a great multitude coming toward Him, He said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?” 6) But this He said to test him, for He Himself knew what He would do. 7) Philip answered Him, “Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little.” 8) One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, 9) “There is a lad here who has five barley loaves and two small fish, but what are they among so many?” 10) Then Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was much grass in the place. So the men sat down, in number about five thousand. 11) And Jesus took the loaves, and when He had given thanks He distributed them to the disciples, and the disciples to those sitting down; and likewise the fish, as much as they wanted. 12) So when they were filled, He said to His disciples, “Gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing is lost.” 13) Therefore they gathered them up, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves which were left over by those who had eaten. 14) Then those men, when they had seen the sign that Jesus did, they said, “This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.” 15) So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him King, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

“After these things,” St. John writes by way of introducing our text. The “things” to which he refers took up some five or six very busy months in the life and ministry of Jesus, and much had changed for the Prophet of Galilee. Crowds continued to gather around Him, to be sure. Most of the people, however, came not because they wanted to hear what He had to say but because they hoped to see a miracle. And opposition to His preaching was hardening. John tells us that His enemies, the religious leaders, especially resented the way Jesus made Himself to be equal to God by calling the God of Israel His own “Father,” and therefore they were

beginning to plot against Him. John the Baptist—the “herald” sent by the Lord to prepare the way for Jesus, had recently been executed by the wicked king Herod at the request of his step-daughter Salome, and the scribes and the Pharisees and the chief Priests wanted very much to put Jesus to death as well. Things were already in motion which were leading up to our Savior’s final trip to Jerusalem.

John tells us that Jesus had crossed over to the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee—from St. Luke we learn that He had come to the area around the fishing town of Bethsaida. In the wilderness region near that small city, Jesus had intended to spend some time alone with His disciples, apart from the throngs of people who were curious to see Him. But once again, word of His movements had raced ahead of Him; John tells us that a large crowd followed Him. And in the account of this evangelist, we learn that we can trust our Savior and Lord to provide for us what we truly need.

## I

All four Gospel-writers include this miracle in their records of Christ’s life, and it is St. Mark who tells us that, as Jesus looked out at the approaching crowd, He was moved by deep compassion for these people. He did not see them as a faceless mob. He did not see them as an annoyance because they were interrupting His time of prayer and instruction. He saw them as individuals—fathers and mothers and children—each with their own stories, with their own hopes and fears and sorrows, and each with their own needs of body and soul. He saw them, Mark tells us, as sheep who needed a shepherd. And therefore He began to serve them—healing the sick that they had brought to Him and teaching them about the Kingdom of God.

It was out of that deeply compassionate love for these many people that Jesus asked His disciples, “Where are we to buy bread, so that these may eat?” Jesus knew that the people needed food. He Himself knew very well what it is to be hungry. After His baptism at the hands of His cousin, He had gone into the wilderness to pray, to fast for forty days, and—in that state of acute hunger—to face the devil’s temptations. Out of compassion for these people who had come to Him, our Savior intended to feed them.

It was a spectacular miracle which our Lord performed in order to provide for these hungry folk there in the wilderness. He started, John tells us, with five loaves of barley-bread and two small fish—what we might consider enough to feed two or three people if they were careful. And yet every single person in that crowd of thousands had more than enough to eat. In fact, John says, the disciples gathered up no less than twelve baskets of leftovers—far more than the amount with which our Lord had started.

You, and I, too, have a compassionate Lord who knows us and knows

what we need for this life. He wants to give us—and He has promised to give us—what is truly best for us, what will serve our eternal welfare. That is a promise that comes to us from Mary’s Son who is God’s Son, our divine Lord who is fully able to carry out His compassionate will for us. That is a profoundly comforting truth which we learn from St. John’s account.

## II

And we should also know that Christ Jesus will always provide for our spiritual needs. Again, it is St. Mark who informs us that, out of His shepherd-like compassion, Jesus devoted Himself to teaching the people who came to Him. Before He fed their bodies, He preached to them about His saving work, about His kingdom. He taught them about how the prophets had pointed to His coming. He taught them to find in Him the redeeming love of the God of Israel. He fed their souls with His word.

Then He illustrated to them His saving love by feeding them—by miraculously multiplying a few loaves of bread and two small fish so that thousands could eat their fill. And the early Church Fathers were united in seeing in that miracle a prophetic picture of the holy sacrament which He has given to His Church—that divinely-given spiritual food for our souls.

It is actually Jesus Himself who encourages us to make that connection. In this same chapter of St. John’s Gospel, He tells the people, “Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you...” And again He tells them, “I am the Bread of life...I am the living bread that came down out of heaven,” and He adds, “My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink.” And so, in His sacramental Supper, He who is the “Bread of life” feeds His flock with His body and His blood. All over the world, His people come to His table at His invitation, week after week, year after year. Yet—as was true of those barley loaves and those two small fish—also in His Holy Sacrament the supply never runs, and there is always enough for everyone.

In His Gospel/Word and at His table, our compassionate Lord provides for our souls. He knows that we need to be reassured of His love—again and again, all through our journey heavenward. He knows that the trials that we face and the sorrows that we bear can lead us to question whether He really cares for us, whether His redemption is really meant for us, whether His forgiveness is truly the cleansing of our souls. And so, in “the Word of the Cross,” as St. Paul calls the Gospel, our Lord assures us that He shed His blood for all of us, and that He also broke the power of the grave for every one of us. And at His table, He nourishes our faith in this miraculous and wonderful way. He seals His promise to each one of us—individually—with the very price that He paid for our salvation.

### III

Thus we are led by our text from John's Gospel to consider and to give thanks for the way that our compassionate Savior provides for our needs of both body and soul. A special context for such meditation is provided by the coronavirus which is spreading so rapidly in this country, including now also in our Philadelphia area. It is a time of worry about the present and uncertainty about the future. And precisely in this context, the appointed Gospel for this *Laetare* Sunday provides us with this timely assurance. As we try to be responsible and helpful to each other and to those around us, we can know that we have a compassionate Lord who cares for us, who has promised to provide for our earthly needs in the way that is truly best for us—with our eternal welfare in mind—and who, through word and sacrament, will never cease to feed our faith in Him and His forgiveness.

And as we give thanks for His compassionate care, we can think about the example set for us by Martin Luther when he was in a similar situation. In the year 1527, the bubonic plague—the “Black Death”—swept through Luther's home-city of Wittenberg. Those who could left town. Even the University there was moved to the city of Jena. The Elector John sent a letter to Luther himself, specifically telling him to get out of Wittenberg. Luther, however, would not leave. Together with his friend and colleague Johannes Bugenhagen, he stayed to take care of the sick. To a friend who also had urged him to leave the city, Luther wrote that he did not want to be brash or foolhardy or tempt the Lord by being reckless. He would be as careful as possible, use common sense and science, and take every measure both to keep himself safe and to avoid endangering the people around him. He would purify the air, take medicine and administer it to others, and he would avoid all persons and places where he was not needed. But Luther said that he would also continue, faithfully and prayerfully, to care for those who needed him. “If my neighbor needs me,” he wrote, “I shall not avoid place or person but will go freely as (I) stated above.” Thus, while putting his faith in his compassionate Lord, Luther acted as responsibly and as carefully as possible as he remained fully devoted to serving others.

Scripture will not answer every question we may have about why this pandemic has visited the world, or about the best courses of action to pursue. St. John's account does, however, give us real assurance. Like Luther, we, too, want to be careful and responsible to others while remaining diligent in active love. And we can do so with confident faith in and in service to a compassionate Savior who truly does provide what is best for us.

May the Holy Spirit grant us such faith for Jesus' sake. Amen.