

Christ, Our Bread

God is never closer to us than when we think He is absent

John 6:1-14

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made, and dost forgive the sins of all those who are penitent; Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Gospel story you have just heard must have been very important in the life of the early Christians. It is interesting to note that except for the crucifixion of Christ it is the only story to appear in all four of the Gospels. Moreover, it appears in some of the Gospels more than once, in slightly altered form. It is reasonable to assume that the early Christians found this episode so helpful that they wanted to be sure that we, in later generations, would get the message.

The story is a very simple and a very familiar one -- probably one of the first many of us learned as children. Jesus was out in the wilderness with His disciples. They saw the crowds converging on them -- thousands of people. It was mealtime. Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was mingling close enough to the people to realize that there was a little boy who had with him five barley loaves and two fish. And Jesus fed the crowd of five thousand or more with those five loaves and two fish.

We must be careful not to misunderstand or to miss entirely the deepest meaning of the story. There was a belief among the early Hebrews that when the Kingdom of God had come, the event would be celebrated by a great banquet, a great feast. And the people who had just eaten interpreted this meal to be the Messianic Feast that heralded the coming of the Kingdom of God. Consequently, John tells us that "When the people saw the sign He had performed they began to say, 'This is undoubtedly the Prophet who is to come into the world.' At that, Jesus realized that they would come and carry Him off to make Him king. So He fled back to the mountain alone" (Jn. 6:14-15). These verses tell us that the crowd had completely misunderstood everything Jesus had told them -- about Himself, and about the Kingdom of God. But we misunderstand it too. Most of us never get beyond the miraculous element. How did Jesus do it? We conjure up images of Jesus breaking off pieces of bread without red! using the size of the loaf. And the more we concentrate on this aspect of the story, the less likely we are to go on into the rest of this chapter of John's Gospel to discover the glory of the deeper message.

The story is told of a big Texas rancher who went to Israel for the first time. He visited a small farm, looked over the area, and said to the Israeli who owned it, "Is this your whole farm? Why back in Texas I get in my Mercedes at five o'clock in the morning and I drive and drive and drive and drive, and I don't get to the other side of my land until sunset." The Israeli thought about this for a moment, then replied, "Gee, I used to have a car like that too." When John sets us up with the story of the loaves and fish, he drives and drives and drives through a magnificent chapter, taking us deeper and deeper and deeper, and when we get to the end of the run, we say, "Gee, I wonder how Jesus performed that miracle!" We're still back at the very beginning. We never get beyond it.

The Gospel of John tells us, time and again, that God loves us so much He nourishes us at the deepest center of our being with His own Living Presence. God Himself is present within us and around us. And as we identify with this Presence of God, as we embrace this union with God, as we accept this life from God, we are nourished. And what John is trying to tell us in his chapter that begins with the miracle story is that of all the ways God feeds us there is one unique way, one supremely valuable way, one especially nourishing way. And that is through His Living Presence in Jesus the Christ. John wants us to understand that if we will feed on this Bread of Life, if we will sink the roots of our life down deep in Christ, we will be nourished as in no other way.

You and I have the opportunity at this moment, and each moment of our lives, to be nourished into wholeness of life. Most of us are aware of this to some degree when a crisis comes our way. We may walk

out of a doctor's office bearing the burden of a life-threatening, heavy diagnosis -- for us, or for someone we love. And in that moment of panic we turn to Jesus our Bread. We know somehow that there is nourishment there, and we turn to receive it. But we are eating of this Source of life only when the pressure is on us in some way. The reality is that it is there all of the time; that it could be nourishing us moment-by-moment and day-by-day. It is our remedy for the emptiness and the uneasiness we experience even when things are going well, and we've got it made, so to speak. Modern psychiatry's files are loaded with case histories of persons who had managed to acquire everything they thought they needed to make them happy, except peace of soul. The uneasiness and the emptiness were still there, literally driving them crazy.

In the film, "La Dolce Vita," the famous Italian Director, Fellini, gave us a devastating commentary on Modern Society. But of all the mixed-up characters in the movie, a man named Steiner is the one person who seems to have it all together. Steiner has it made. He is a University Professor. He likes good books. He likes good music. He has a fine house. He has a beautiful wife and two lovely children. He is the only character in the film who projects some feeling of hope. On the surface, he seems to know where he is going with his life. Then, suddenly, comes the shocking scene. On a particular afternoon when his wife is out shopping, Steiner murders his own two children in their sleep, then kills himself. He did this because at the center of his being he was malnourished. The sense of emptiness and purposelessness was so overwhelming that he could not stand the thought of his children growing up to experience it nor could he endure it any longer himself. By means of this ! scenario, Fellini is trying to tell us, symbolically, something very important about life in contemporary society: so many of the people who seem to have it made are afflicted with emptiness and decay and degeneration at the center of their being.

John would have us understand that God loves us so much He will nourish us moment-by-moment and day-by-day through Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life. John would have us understand also that this Bread of Life is the most valuable, the most priceless thing we can ever share with another person. If you care about your wife, your husband, your children, the people you work with, the people whose lives you touch this week -- if you care about them at all -- there are some things you can give them that will help them, but nothing will help them as much as this Bread which is Jesus Christ.

Every artist who has depicted the multiplication of the loaves and fish scene emphasizes the role of the disciples in distributing the bread. The disciples of Jesus Christ are sharers of Bread. They break the Bread and share it with the world. Our discipleship is incomplete if we are not sharing Jesus, the Bread of Life, with others.

Francois Mouriac, the French Nobel Prize winner, says that through much of his life he had been aware of Christ, but with his writing and lecturing and many other things that he did, had been really too busy for Him. He says, "I preferred the radical anguish of my youth to Christ, I suppose." "But now," he says, "Christ Has become the great Love of the evening of my life." He says he is amazed to have discovered that God is never so close to us as when we think He is absent. But most importantly, he tells about all the intellectual problems he had down through the years -- trying to sort things out, trying to put the pieces together, trying to solve the puzzle. Then He says, "God has never answered my questions, which were laden with despair. All He has ever done is to give Himself to me in Christ."

O GOD, by whom the meek are guided in judgment, and light riseth up in darkness for the godly; Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what thou wouldest have us to do, that the Spirit of Wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in thy light we may see light, and in thy straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*