

Today is the fourth Sunday of Lent. Anglicans call it “Mothering Sunday,” based upon the Epistle lesson today. Chapter 4, verse 23 of St. Paul's letter to the Galatians reads, “Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all.” Originally, Mothering Sunday referred to our Mother the Church, and it was the practice on this Sunday to go visit either the church in which one was baptized, or the diocesan cathedral if the journey was too burdensome to attend the former. In modern times, this Sunday in England has also taken on more of a flavor of our American Mother's Day, with the focus on the mothers of our homes rather than upon Mother Church.

In the Gospel lesson this morning, we are confronted with the abundance of the Kingdom provided for us in Jesus. When faced with a problem or conflict, our go-to answer may be like Philip's: “Two hundred penny worth of bread would not be enough that each should have a little.” Now this amount doesn't sound like very much to us, but the penny here is basically a day's wage. We are like Philip because we approach the world through the eyes of scarcity. We believe that we have to fight for what is rightly ours, we have to make sure we get what we deserve, for if we don't, then we will miss out. This happened to me just yesterday – I was picking up some soil amendment, just two bags, and another customer who was ahead of me was picking up some of the same product. The pallet had four bags left, and I started to panic – what if he takes them all? I would have to go back in the store and choose something else. I asked the attendant, “Is that all that you have?” His reply: “No, the pallet next to it is the same.” Immediately I was relieved... but also a little ashamed. Not that I behaved badly, but where did that internal impulse come from, to grasp for what I wanted ahead of the other customer? That impulse that prompted me to grab what I could quickly before it ran out? It is from that common human nature that we all have, the nature which is subject to scarcity and death.

But our Gospel lesson this morning reminds us that we are no longer subject to such things in the same way that we once were, for in Christ, we will have abundantly what we need. Now having said that, I feel at once that I need to hedge here a bit. Of course this doesn't mean that God is an unlimited cosmic vending machine, right? God doesn't just pour out riches upon us to waste and squander. He is not interested in spoiling us. We do not preach a health and wealth gospel. In fact, the lives of the holiest Christians, St. Francis and St. Brigid for example, are often characterized by poverty and giving beyond one's means.

Sometimes, to be sure, we live in physical scarcity. But within that scarcity, God gives us abundance. Do we lack food? “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the Mouth of God.” Do we lack raiment? “Consider the lilies of the field, if

God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall He not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?" Christ will certainly provide what we need, even if that need is to have scarcity or to have plenty. The point is that Christ has no limitation. Life in Christ as His followers is marked by confidence that, whether in need or in plenty, Christ's will is being worked out in our lives.

Now, I must also warn you, that this is not to be taken flippantly. To have physical needs is to endure real suffering; we shouldn't pretend that such suffering is easy to endure. Yet Jesus is always there suffering alongside us. Jesus is always there encouraging our hearts with the abundance of His love, and, as He sees fit, with what material abundance He may bestow. There is no lack of what Christ may give. There is only what Christ wishes to achieve in our lives or through our lives.

So in the Gospel lesson, let us highlight a few interesting moments. First, let us notice that the conflict in this story is caused by Christ Himself. None of the disciples suggested that they were responsible for feeding this enormous crowd. It was Jesus who asked Phillip, "Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?" Jesus asks this explicitly to test the disciples. Jesus had it all already worked out. He knew what He would do. Do you not think that if Jesus would test the disciples in this way, that He might also test us similarly? Phillip somewhat panics – we don't have the funds to buy bread for all the people and we probably couldn't find enough bread to buy even if we had the funds. Send them away to find their own bread. Not the best look here, Philip.

Who is it, however, that tries to be resourceful? It is Peter's brother, Andrew. "Well, this young boy has some bread and some fish. Not sure what we should do with it, but at least it's something." As Christ accepted this small bit of food, He is happy to receive our meager gifts, offered freely and humbly. He then multiplies the effect of such gifts so that they meet greater needs than we could imagine. He exceeds our doubts and rationality. He has no limit to what He can do. So therefore, in our imaginations, let us not impose limits on what God can do either. Pray with faith. Pray with diligence. Pray with perseverance. God will answer when and how He chooses, to accomplish what he wishes in us and in the world. And He will answer in abundantly greater ways than we expect.

Continuing with the narrative, we notice that the disciples took up twelve baskets of fragments of bread once everyone had their fill. The number twelve in scripture represents the completeness of God's chosen people, for it connects to the twelve tribes in Israel. Remember a couple of weeks ago when we read of the Syro-Phoenician woman who came to Jesus asking that her daughter be healed. Jesus rebuked her saying that His ministry was to

the Jewish people; but this Gentile woman's response was that even the dogs feed off of the crumbs that fall from the children's table. These fragments in today's lesson are the crumbs that are for the Gentile church. Jesus was ministering to the Jews here, but there are leftovers, and plenty of them! In Christ all men may be fed; there is no scarcity here.

And we should not miss the obvious allusions to the Eucharist in this miracle either. St. John states at the beginning of our reading that the time of the Passover was drawing near. St. Paul states that Christ is our Passover, and we also know that Holy Communion was instituted on the night He was betrayed which was also at the time of the Passover. Jesus is the Passover Lamb, He is the Lamb of God that was slain for us to take away the sins of the world, and we feast upon His Body, present to us in the bread of our Holy Communion feast. Notice that Christ begins this miracle by giving thanks and then breaking the bread to be distributed by His Disciples to the people. These people had seen the healing that Christ had wrought. They experienced Christ and wanted more of him so they followed Him wherever He went. Where does He lead them? To a mountain. Into the heavens where they encounter God.

The miracle that we have in the Lord's Supper is this same miracle that we witness in the gospel. "He took Bread; and when he had given thanks, he brake it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, Take, eat, this is my Body, which is given for you; Do this in remembrance of me." Compare this to, "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." This miracle foreshadows what will become the Holy Communion. In both cases, Christ multiplies the bread to be an abundant spiritual feast. The miraculous feeding the 5000 satisfied the physical hunger of the people, but they were also fed spiritually, for they followed Christ. They knew Jesus to be more than just an itinerant teacher. For "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." They knew that Jesus was the One for whom they had been waiting. He was the messiah. He was come. And to us, every time we gather around His Table, He comes again.

The question then put to us this morning is, "Can we see that Christ is indeed that Prophet, that Christ is indeed the Messiah?" Maybe we are here today because of habit. Maybe we are here out of obligation. Maybe we are here because we have been baptized, and we confess that we are Christians. But do we really understand the abundance of the Christian life? Will we live into that abundance even when we are in poverty in this world? We are the children of Jerusalem which is above. We are children of the free woman, not of the slave. We are the heirs of God, sons and daughters of the King. We don't need to fear.

We simply need to obey in faith. We will be tested in this life because it is only through testing that we grow, that we learn godliness. Be assured though, that Jesus has this handled.

Just a few words here about how to break out of the limitations to which we become so accustomed in our everyday experience. The physical world is marred by scarcity. It is ruled by death, for in Adam all die. But let us not forget the second part of that verse, "but in Christ shall all be made alive." Like those people around the Sea of Galilee, cling on to Christ, following Him where ever He leads. If you do not have a devoted church life, if you do not have a devoted prayer life, if Jesus isn't part of your day-to-day thoughts and activities, then you will not be able to see the abundance that He has for you. So worship. Pray. Sing unto the Lord. Read the Bible. These disciplines are critical to becoming aware of Christ's presence in your life.

Secondly, I encourage you to develop what I call the liturgical, or spiritual, imagination. This is simply living into the biblical reality that occurs in our worship. When you receive the bread and the wine of the Lord's supper, take a moment to understand that these are holy gifts, that Christ was broken and died for you, and that He now gives His very self to you because He loves you. When we say, "Lift up your hearts, We lift them up unto the Lord!" we are, as it were, ascending with Jesus up that mountain. We are ascending spiritually into heaven. Develop the spiritual imagination to sense what is happening. For as we come to the table in obedience, we pray, "that we ... (may) be filled with thy grace and heavenly benediction, and made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him."

But that imagery must not stop at the table, here in our church. The experience of receiving Christ, of being strengthened with His Body and Blood, of being made one with Him, and He with us, must be taken from here out into the world. It must be taken with us when we look at the checking account, not knowing where the money for groceries is coming from. It must be taken into our workplaces as we deal with other people who every single day, challenge and test our ability to love our neighbors as ourselves. It must be taken with us when we lock our keys in the car. It must be taken with us when we fail the exams. It must be taken with us everywhere and in every situation. This is how we live into the abundance given us in Jesus Christ. We simply offer every moment, all the successes, all the failures, all the disappointments, all the tragedies, up to Him, knowing that He has it handled. And not only does he have it handled, He walks with us through it all.

God indeed can do anything for us. He shall provide all our needs. The abundance that He has for us is without limit, and He uses it to mature us and to grow His kingdom, calling all people into repentance and love. So may we become more keenly aware of Him in

every moment of our lives. May we recommit to the spiritual disciplines that make us always aware of Him. May we live in confidence that the abundance of God is active in our lives. And may we be generous distributors of that abundance of love, and mercy, and treasure, to the so many around us who live in the world of scarcity and death.

And now, brothers and sisters, come to the table, receive God's love for you through Christ's Body and Blood. May we have the spiritual eyes to experience through these signs, the reality of the abundance of God for us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.