

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
Fed by the Bread of Life
Matthew 14:13-21

The feeding of the multitude is the only miracle of Jesus recorded in all four gospels. In fact, it is told six times: twice as the feeding of the 4,000 and four times as the feeding of the 5,000. So why did the early church regard this event as so significant?

Think about this verse from Matthew's account.

Jesus has ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Matthew then describes what Jesus did, and there is something very familiar about it:

'Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled...'

Compare those words with Matthew's account of the Last Supper:

'Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body."'

Do you see the connections? 'Taking the ... loaves ... blessed ... broke ... gave ... ate.' The story of the feeding of the multitude does not mention the cup of wine; instead, there is fish. Yet in the catacombs of Rome, where early Christians left pictures and signs of their faith and practice, the Eucharist was often represented not by thirteen men in an upper room, but by a company reclining on the ground, with baskets of bread and two fish clearly in evidence. For the early Church, the Eucharist was rooted as much in the feeding of the multitude as it was in the Last Supper. Without a doubt, the Gospel writers wanted us to hear in this story an echo of how Christ comes to us in the Eucharist and feeds us with the spiritual food of his body and blood.

Although it's presented as a miracle, the feeding of the multitude is also portrayed as a practical event. There were hungry people present who needed feeding, and so Jesus fed them. At the Eucharist we come as hungry people too:

hungry for the love and care of God;
hungry for God's forgiveness and renewal;
hungry for the knowledge that we're not alone in the world
but that God is with us;
hungry for the assurance of eternal life
and of our union with all God's people, on earth and in heaven;
hungry for the strength to serve God faithfully in the world.

We come to the Eucharist because we need feeding. We come because we need spiritual food to nourish us, strengthen us, and enable us on life's journey. Without the food we receive at the Eucharist, we suffer spiritual malnutrition. Jesus was clear: we cannot live without this food:

'I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.'

Into our hands Jesus places the gift of himself. We are handed the body and blood of Christ: the bread of life and the cup of blessing. This talk of feeding isn't merely a metaphor. It's real and tangible. We're not being asked to conjure up a hypothetical concept. It's God's way to meet us in the common things

of life, and to use these ordinary things as the means of conveying what is spiritual and divine. You can't get much more ordinary than food. Yet God has chosen such signs — food and drink — to nourish us week after week with grace and to strengthen our union with the living Christ and with one another.

Christianity isn't based on an abstract idea, but on a reality which we can know and experience with our senses — and the Eucharist is the sacrament of the senses. Here we meet the One described as the word of life. The first letter of John puts it like this: 'We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.'

The Word of God, the word of life, who is Jesus Christ, is to be heard, seen, looked at, and touched. At the Eucharist we participate in an event in which Jesus is present to our senses. We see, we touch, we taste, we hear. We see as the priest, standing at the table as Jesus did, takes the bread and wine. We hear as thanks is given, bread is broken, and the unforgettable words are spoken again: "This is my body ... this is my blood ... do this to remember me." We touch as the bread is placed in our hands, and we taste as we take the bread and wine to our mouth and consume it.

So today, as you receive communion, take time to use your senses. Look at the elements as they are taken, as thanks is offered, and as bread is broken. As they are placed in your hands, pause and see this gift of divine grace. Look at this heavenly food which has become the body and blood of Jesus. Then consume it. Take time to know what is happening; time to sense this spiritual food becoming part of you. Here is Jesus, God with us, satisfying our hunger, feeding us with love and care, and promising that we will be raised with him at the last day. Then return to your place and spend time in thanksgiving. You need not use words. Perhaps simply call to mind the bread and wine that you have seen, touched, and tasted — and be in the wonder of it.

At this Eucharist, as at every Eucharist, we are like those who sat on the grass with Jesus. Like them, we recognise our hunger. Like them, we find ourselves fed by Jesus himself. Here we affirm that what we have heard, what we have seen, what we have looked at and touched, is the word of life: Jesus, God with us.

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Taradale — 2.8.2026