

Gospel text

Matthew 14: 13-21

13 When he heard of the death of John the Baptist, Jesus departed by boat from this region to go alone to a secluded place. But at this news, crowds from various cities began to follow him on foot. 14 Landing and seeing a huge crowd before him, Jesus was moved with compassion for all these people and began to heal their sick. 15 When evening came, the disciples went to him and said, "The place is deserted and it is already late. Let the people go, so they can go to the villages to buy something to eat". 16 But Jesus answered them, "They don't have to go. Give them something to eat. 17 The disciples replied, "We have nothing here except these five loaves and two fish." 18 Jesus said, "Bring them to me here." 19 And after asking the people to sit on the grass, taking the five loaves and two fish, and raising his eyes to heaven, he made the blessing and, having broken them, gave the disciples the loaves, and the disciples gave them to the crowd. 20 They were all able to eat and be full, and they took away the remains of the meal, filling twelve baskets. 21 Now, the people who ate were about 5,000 men, not counting women and children.

Gospel commentary - Homily

What do we multiply?

I was listening to a lady tell me about her "many" mothers. She works for the "Crossroads of Mercy", a shelter, and takes care of families in need, mostly single parents living on social assistance. She described to me the disappointment of these women who, too often, give birth to children to meet their unmet emotional need, and who find themselves forced to give much more than they received. I had contacted her to offer what was left of the petty cash in our office coffee club which was closing. Since I knew that poor people do not shop anywhere, I bought some food coupons from a discount grocery store. "It will do a lot of good for 'our' mothers", she kept telling me.

What this woman reminded me of was the multiplier effect of inhuman situations: a child that one disliked and got rid of, who will give birth to unloved children and, each in turn, will give birth to unloved children whom they want to get rid of, and so on. In the end, there will be five thousand of these children. But, at the same time, this woman reminded me that the opposite can happen. "Every week we call them, to find out how it goes, and for 'our' mothers, it's a discovery: someone is interested in her, someone cares about what happens to her." If we are interested in these people in need of love, if we are given them what they have not received, perhaps they will be able to communicate a little true affection to their children. What if it also had a multiplier effect? Instead of five thousand deficient children, we may find five thousand children really loved?

This situation brings me directly to the situation of the Gospel of this Sunday. You know the story by heart. Jesus needs to step back after learning of the death of John the Baptist, which is for him the mirror of what may happen as well to him, his own death. But people manage to find him, and Jesus' reaction is to feel immense compassion for these people, especially for the sick. The disciples, who were not involved so far, intervene so that the crowd goes to eat somewhere. And Jesus said to them, "But it's up to you to feed them, you have everything you need to feed them." You know the rest. Five thousand people will be fed to the full, and there will be enough leftovers to fill twelve baskets.

When we take the time to "decode" this story, we can clearly see what the evangelist Matthew is saying: "In the context of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and therefore of his absence, it is up to all Christians to continue his work of mercy, and if they believe enough that through their hands it is Jesus who continues to act, then their work will have a multiplier effect. We are in the habit of considering this narrative of Jesus feeding the crowd as marvelous. But the marvelous is not where we think. It is first in the compassionate heart, it is also in the faith that makes you act.

I have always found that one of the great traits of Jesus as presented by the Gospels is his ability to be moved. Human situations move him. This vulnerability makes him permeable to so many people, and thereby to life itself. Without this vulnerability, there would never have been a story of Jesus feeding the crowd. Without this vulnerability, the "Crossroads of Mercy" would not exist.

But vulnerability could lead to despair if there was not faith. Faith that, even if I have little to give, that's what can make a difference. Faith that even if the needs seem too great, what I give will have a multiplier effect. Faith that I am not alone: through my hands, someone else distributes life. It is this faith that keeps me from despairing, which leads me to give despite the feeling that the scale of the needs is disproportionate to my gift. Without faith, the "Crossroads of Mercy" would have closed, for what is brought is a drop in the ocean.

The Eucharistic celebration is too often reduced to an insipid rite. However, today's story reminds us that it should be the place of intense emotion, of great vulnerability in front of so many faces and needs, and that the breaking of the bread should convince us to action: by our faith, the love experienced will have a multiplier effect, because Someone acts through us.

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, April 2005