

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

How to be able to eat with others?

There was a man who had so far had a successful career: interesting and recognized work, good salary, laudatory evaluation of his performance. His life as a couple was going well enough and the children seemed happy. For relatives and friends, he was the ideal man. Everything was perfect, except on one point. The man had alcohol problems. For a while he had managed to conceal everything, mainly thanks to his many trips. But his spouse had started to note strange things: forgetting the children's birthday, tendency to isolate himself, irritable and sometimes violent mood, many unforeseen last minute meetings on which he remained very vague and from which he only returned late at night, or long evenings locked up in his home office. A first crisis broke out when the spouse accidentally found empty bottles in the garbage bag; he had neglected to bury them in the neighboring garbage cans. He swore it was the only time, that he had the situation in hand and that he would never do it again. It was true ... for a while. And everything started again. Despite his efforts to conceal everything, he let himself be surprised one evening, a glass in his hand, in an advanced state of intoxication. Faced with so many lies and cover-ups, the woman decided to shove up her spouse against the wall: there had to be a definitive solution or it was the end of their marriage. The man wept bitterly, admitted his addiction, cried out for help, and pledged less to never drink again than to constantly tell the truth. This is how this "ideal man", taking the road to truth, found the path to healing and the path to freedom. His wife gave him all the support he needed and the couple's life resumed with new depth.

This story that I have just told allows us to enter the Gospel of Matthew on Jesus feeding the crowd. Too often we forget the beginning of the story: "Seeing before him a huge crowd, Jesus was moved with compassion for all these people and began to heal their sick. Who are these people looking for Jesus, to the point of taking him out of his retirement in the desert? People who need help. They are suffering people. When we suffer too much, all our energies are focused on the fight against pain, and there is very little left to take an interest in others and all of humanity. And we don't have much appetite.

But Jesus spends the day healing people and they find their strength again. From experience we know that after being freed from a long illness, our heart is now ready for celebration. We then have sufficient energy to open up to others and to the world. This is the context of our story.

But beware ! It's not just about eating. If it were just a matter of eating, why would Jesus object to people going to the nearby villages for food, as his disciples suggested? From experience, we know that when we invite people home for a good meal, it is because we really want to connect, we are looking for a form of intimacy and communion. This is what Jesus offers. And he's proposing it because people are now ready for intimacy and communion, after being healed. And this human community will be possible with the little they have, five loaves and two fish. It is not much, but by agreeing to give what little we have, everything becomes possible.

We have in a very synthetic way in this story an aspect of human drama. In various ways, we are people who need healing. I mentioned the story of the alcoholic, I could have talked about the multiple forms of addiction: drugs, games, pornography, pedophilia, prostitution, power, money. Not a week goes by without the newspapers making the headlines with a scandal, like this head of an anti-corruption group who became a client of a luxury prostitutes' house or this broker of a large banking institution suspected of fraud. But coming to light with these problems can be the first step towards recovery. Because healing begins with the truth about yourself. And with healing comes the ability to open up to others, to re-establish ties, to rebuild the community.

As a believer, we see in all healing and reconstruction of the community the work of the same Jesus who fed this crowd by the lake. But at the same time the challenge remains: are we capable of hoping that despite all personal and collective failures, this same force is at work today in the world and with which we must associate ourselves?

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, March 2008