

Historic Commentary

(Ninth Sunday after Pentecost - Year A)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Matthew 14:13-21 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Matthew 14](#), from a 13th century document called the *Catena Aurea* that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Chrysostom](#): Note carefully the Teacher's skill. Observe with what discretion he draws them toward believing. Observe how deliberately this unfolds. For he did not simply say, "I will feed them." The deeper significance of that would have not been easily understood. So what does he say? "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." He did not say "I give them" but "you give them." For at this point their regard for him was essentially as to a man. They said to him, "We have only five loaves here and two fish." At this point Mark adds, "They did not understand the saying, for their heart was hardened." For they were continuing to crawl like babies.

[Cyril of Alexandria](#): Let us examine carefully what this sending away of the crowds is all about. Some of those who followed Christ were afflicted by evil spirits and begged to be delivered from them. Others were afflicted with various illnesses from which they sought relief. Therefore, because the disciples knew that Jesus had only to consider what those who were suffering longed for and it would be accomplished, "they sent them away." They did this not so much because they thought Jesus' time was too valuable but because they had a love for the crowds and, as though already having an understanding of pastoral care, they began to care for the people.

[Chrysostom](#): Finally he said to them, "Bring them here to me." Although this was a deserted place, he that is here is ready to feed the world. The one who is speaking to you is not subject to time, even though "the day is now over." In John's Gospel it is further related that these were loaves of barley. This is not mentioned accidentally but with the

object of teaching us to trample under foot the pride of costly living. Such was also the diet of the prophets.

Jerome: They are ordered to sit down on the grass and, according to another Evangelist, to recline in groups of hundreds and of fifties. In this way from the repentance of the fifty, they ascended toward the perfect summit of one hundred. He looked up to heaven that he might teach them to keep their eyes focused there. He then took in hand five loaves of bread and two fish; he broke the loaves and gave the food to the disciples. By the breaking of the bread, he makes it into a seedbed of food—for if the bread had been left intact and not pulled apart and broken into pieces, they would have been unable to feed the great crowds of men, women and children. The law with the prophets are therefore pulled apart and broken into pieces. Mysteries are made manifest, so that what did not feed the multitude of people in its original whole and unbroken state now feeds them in its divided state.

Chrysostom: In this miracle Jesus was teaching them humility, temperance, charity, to be of like mind toward one another and to share all things in common. He did so in his choice of location, by providing nothing more than loaves and fishes, by setting the same food before all and having them share it in common and by affording no one more than another.

And not even here does he hold back on the miracle, but it continues as the loaves become fragments. The broken pieces signify that of those loaves, some remained unreceived. This was in order that those who were absent might also learn what had been done. For this providential purpose, then, Jesus indeed permitted the crowds to get hungry in order that no one might suppose what took place to be as illusion. For this purpose he also caused just twelve baskets to remain over: That Judas, too, might bear one. He wanted all the disciples to know his power. He fed their hunger. In Elijah's case something similar also took place.

Cyril of Alexandria: So that by every means the Lord might be known to be God by nature, he multiplies what is little, and he looks up to heaven as though asking for the blessing from above. Now he does this out of the divine economy, for our sakes. For he himself is the one who fills all things, the true blessing from above and from the Father. But, so that we might learn that when we are in charge of the table and are preparing to break the loaves, we ought to bring them to God with hands upraised and bring down upon them the

blessing from above, he became for us the beginning and pattern and way.

It is possible to see these new miracles concurring with more ancient ones and as being activities of one and the same power. The manna once remained in the wilderness for those of Israel. Now, behold, again in the desert he has provided ungrudgingly for those in want of food, as though bringing it down from heaven. For to multiply what is little and to feed such a multitude as though out of nothing would not be out of keeping with the former miracle. At that time Israel was to partake according to need; they had not received food in order to take it away with them, even though many fragments were left. This is, again, a good symbol for measuring use according to need and of not introducing an acquisitiveness that goes beyond what is needful.

Vs 14. He was moved with compassion towards them. The other two Evangelists, and particularly Mark, state more clearly the reason why this compassion (συμπάθεια) was awakened in the mind of Christ. It was because he saw famishing souls, whom the warmth of zeal had carried away from their homes and led into a desert place. This scarcity of teaching indicated a wretched state of disorder; and accordingly Mark says that Jesus was moved with compassion towards them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd. Not that, as to his Divine nature, he looked upon them all as sheep, but that, as man, he judged according to the present aspect of the case. It was no small manifestation of piety that they left their own homes, and flocked in crowds to the Prophet of God, though he purposely concealed himself from them. Besides, it ought to be remarked, that Christ was mindful of the character which he sustained; for he had been commanded to discharge the duties of a public teacher, and was therefore bound to look upon all the Jews, for the time being, as belonging to the flock of God and to the Church, till they withdrew from it.

So strongly was Christ moved by this feeling of compassion, that though, in common with his disciples, he was fatigued and almost worn out by uninterrupted toil, he did not spare himself. He had endeavored to obtain some relaxation, and that on his own account as well as for the sake of his disciples; but when urgent duty calls him to additional labor, he willingly lays aside that private consideration, and devotes himself to teaching the multitudes. Although he has now laid aside those feelings which belonged to him as a mortal man, yet there is no reason to doubt that he looks down from heaven on poor sheep that have no shepherd, provided they ask relief of their wants. Mark says, that he began to teach them MANY things; that is, he spent a long time in preaching, that they

might reap some lasting advantage. Luke says, that he spoke to them concerning the Kingdom of God, which amounts to the same thing. Matthew makes no mention of any thing but miracles, because they were of great importance in establishing Christ's reputation; but it may naturally be concluded that he did not leave out doctrine, which was a matter of the highest importance.

We have no right, indeed, to expect that Christ will always follow this method of supplying the hungry and thirsty with food; but it is certain that he will never permit his own people to want the necessaries of life, but will stretch out his hand from heaven, whenever he shall see it to be necessary to relieve their necessities. Those who wish to have Christ for their provider, must first learn not to long for refined luxuries, but to be satisfied with barley-bread.

Christ commanded that the people should sit down in companies; and he did so, first, that by this arrangement of the ranks the miracle might be more manifest; secondly, that the number of the men might be more easily ascertained, and that, while they looked at each other, they might in their turn bear testimony to this heavenly favor. Thirdly, perceiving that his disciples were anxious, he intended to make trial of their obedience by giving them an injunction which at first sight appeared to be absurd; for, as no provisions were at hand, there was reason to wonder why Christ was making arrangements that resembled a feast. To the same purpose is what follows, that he gave them the loaves, in order that in their hands the astonishing increase might take place, and that they might thus be the ministers of Christ's divine power; for as if it had been of small importance that they should be eye-witnesses, Christ determined that his power should be handled by them. Two hundred pence, according to the computation of Budaeus, are worth about thirty-four French livres; and so when the disciples speak of what is sufficient for them, that every one of them may take a little, they calculate at the rate of a farthing for each individual. Forming so high an estimate of the sum of money that would be required to purchase bread barely sufficient for procuring a morsel to the people, they are entitled to no small praise for their obedience, when they implicitly comply with the command of Christ, and leave the result to his disposal.

19. He blessed. In this passage, as in many others, blessing denotes thanksgiving. Now Christ has taught us, by his example, that we cannot partake of our food with holiness and purity, unless we express our gratitude to God, from whose hand it comes to us.

Accordingly, Paul tells us, that every kind of food which God bestows upon us is sanctified by the word of God and prayer, (1 Timothy 4:5;) by which he means, that brutal men, who do not regard by faith the blessing of God, and do not offer to him thanksgiving, corrupt and pollute by the filth of their unbelief all that is by nature pure; and, on the other hand, that they are corrupted and defiled by the food which they swallow, because to unbelievers nothing is clean. Christ has therefore laid down for his followers the proper manner of taking food, that they may not profane their own persons and the gifts of God by wicked sacrilege.

Raising his eyes towards heaven. This expresses warm and earnest supplication. Not that such an attitude is at all times necessary when we pray, but because the Son of God did not choose to disregard the outward forms which are fitted to aid human weakness. It ought also to be taken into account, that to raise the eyes upwards is an excitement well fitted to arouse us from sloth, when our minds are too strongly fixed on the earth.

Vs 20. And carried away what was left. The fragments that remained after satisfying so vast a multitude of men were more than twelve times larger in quantity than what was at first put into their hands, and this contributed not a little to the splendor of the miracle. In this way all came to know that the power of Christ had not only created out of nothing the food that was necessary for immediate use, but that, if it should be required, there was also provision for future wants; and, in a word, Christ intended that, after the miracle had been wrought, a striking proof of it should still remain, which, after being refreshed by food, they might contemplate at leisure.

Now though Christ does not every day multiply our bread, or feed men without the labor of their hands or the cultivation of their fields, the advantage of this narrative extends even to us. If we do not perceive that it is the blessing of God which multiplies the corn, that we may have a sufficiency of food, the only obstacle is, our own indolence and ingratitude. That, after we have been supported by the annual produce, there remains seed for the following year, and that this could not have happened but for an increase from heaven, each of us would easily perceive, were he not hindered by that very depravity which blinds the eyes both of the mind and of the flesh, so as not to see a manifest work of God. Christ intended to declare that, as all things have been delivered

into his hands by the Father, so the food which we eat proceeds from his grace.