

Lent IV 2023

At that time, Jesus went over the Sea of Galilee. And a great multitude followed him because they saw the miracles which he did on them that were diseased.

**In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen.**

What would a story or parable of Jesus be without a character or characters to help him get his message across. If you notice, he rarely gives these characters names, such as, “A certain man or a certain woman.” In other areas of the Bible, there are well-known names we’re familiar with such as his Blessed Mother and Disciples.

This morning I want us to consider an undifferentiated mass of humanity called “the crowd” or the “multitude.” These are the people, who, among other things, see and hear Jesus’ teaching and miracles. They are his audience for his public appearances. The crowd is often friendly to him, but just as often hostile. And of course, they will become more and more hostile as Good Friday approaches.

This is what I would have you take away this morning. Lest we be tempted to be overly judgmental about the behavior of the crowd, let us make it clear that the crowd stands for us. That is you and I! When we imagine what it must have been like to be there as the events of

the Gospels unfolded, we should imagine ourselves in the faces of the crowd.

In the early chapters of Saint John's Gospel, the main characteristic of the crowd is their fickleness-the instability and uncertainty of their understanding and their commitment to who Jesus is and to what he is saying. We see all that in their great interest in the miracles Jesus performs-and their rather lesser interest in his teaching about their sinfulness and what they ought to do about it.

Early in the Gospel St. John tells us that when Jesus first went to Jerusalem, many people believed in him because they saw the miracles he performed. But he also says that Jesus did not take their belief in him seriously or place any confidence in it. The belief of the crowd was just a predictable and rather selfish response to displays of power which dazzled them and did them some good. Jesus knew that it would be a different story when a real test came along.

The crowd Jesus feeds miraculously in today's Gospel has come together because of his reputation as a healer. There is no problem there. One of the purposes of miracles is to get people's attention in the hope that they will be moved to take a closer look. God still uses miracles to bring us face to face with him.

The issue is joined the next morning when the crowd chases Jesus to the other side of the Lake. Jesus is exasperated with them, and he says, “You aren’t here because you understand what my miracles mean, you just liked the free lunch and you’re looking for another one. Stop wasting your time on food that will spoil. Concentrate on the food that will last forever; food that I can give you if you believe in me.”

The crowd says, “What miracle are you going to do to make us believe in you?” It is obvious that feeding five thousand people with a little bit of food just the day before wasn’t convincing enough. The crowd says, “Yesterday was pretty good, but what’s next-do more.” Then they go on to tell him, “The miracle that really impressed us was when Moses gave our ancestors manna in the wilderness.”

Jesus replies, “Everybody who ate the manna is dead. If you eat the bread that I give you, you will never die. The bread I am going to give you is my flesh...if you eat my flesh and drink my blood you will have my eternal life in you...anyone who eats this bread will live forever.”

And people wonder why we put such an emphasis on receiving Holy Communion.

The miracles the crowd saw brought them together, but the teaching divides them. Some take the rational way out, saying, “This is absurd. How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Others get closer to the truth about themselves and complain, “This teaching is too hard, who can listen to it?”

Jesus is relentless. He says, “If you think this is hard to swallow, what are you going to do when you see me go back to where I was before?”

As even more people begin to turn away, he asks the twelve disciples, “Are you going to go away too?” St. Peter replies, “Where would we go? You have the words of eternal life.” Again, as we saw in our Bible study, we know how long Peter’s loyalty would last.

The point should be obvious. Of course, it is easier to ride along and think God is a good fellow when things are going well and life is a happy string of free lunches and answered prayers. The test comes when things become puzzling and uncomfortable and downright out of hand. Perhaps even tragic.

It is then that we see that our real question about God is not, “Does he exist,” but rather, “Does he know what he is doing? Is what is going on in my life really evidence that he loves me? And the real

question about ourselves is, “Can we still trust him and have confidence in him when we are just not sure?”

In its great pastoral wisdom, the Prayer Book offers the passage I have just been talking about as a Gospel reading in the order for the Communion of the sick. It is often the very last words a person who is dying ever hears. It says,

“I am the bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever: and the bread that I give is my flesh which I will give for the life of the world.”

We have this assurance each time we gather at this altar. We are the multitude; a multitude who hopefully believes this promise.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Amen.