

HOMILY ON THE 8TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Father Filip Lommaert

Sunday, August 7, 2022

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God.
Amen.

We just listened to the Gospel reading of Saint Matthew about the parable of the five loaves of bread and the two fish. Our Lord Jesus had gone out and had seen a great multitude. He had been moved with compassion for them, and He had healed the sick.

These people had been following Him in the desert for hours and hours, and by now they were hungry. But our Lord, with just five loaves of bread and two fish, after having blessed them and multiplied them, fed five thousand men, besides women and children, and had twelve baskets of broken pieces left following this miraculous feat.

The grace and goodness of God are bountiful and He shares His grace and goodness with everyone without any prerequisites. The people he was feeding were, in the eyes of the religious class of the time, poor and sinful, they were pariahs, outcasts.

This is a story that tells us about the Compassion of God for everything He created. Jesus was worried about the people being hungry and that they might have to travel a long way on an empty stomach. He cared for them and He loved them, so He took care of their most basic need; food. The Father of our Lord and Saviour, is the All-Compassionate One, and Jesus is His perfect image.

This story is also prophetic. Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ went into the barren wilderness, probably to pray as he had done on several occasions, and the people had followed him. And there he fed them with bread and fish.

For those with an interest in the Old Testament, this will certainly remind you of the feeding of the people of Israel as they sojourned in the desert. Remember the manna, that mysterious bread-like substance that covered the ground in the morning that was given to the Hebrew people by God to feed them.

The faithful Jews in the crowd would have noticed the similarity and connected the two events. Therefore, that Old Testament event was prophetic.

Jesus shows us that we should never eat without first giving thanks to God. The terminology points to the Last Supper (Matt. 26:26) and leads to a eucharistic interpretation of this miracle. Just as the disciples distribute the bread to the multitudes, so also Christ feeds the Eucharist to His flock through the hands of His bishops and Presbyters.

John Chrysostom tells us “not to touch any meal until we have given thanks to Him who gives us food”. This blessing also presents a clear eucharistic image and directs us to pursue spiritual food greater than that which is earthly.

And St. Cyril of Alexandria says: “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 up, raised and bring down upon them the blessing from above, he became for us the beginning and pattern and way”.

In a way, every meal and partaking of food is Eucharistic and that is why in Orthodox tradition every meal begins and ends with prayers of blessing and thanksgiving. Why? Because all of life is a sacrament!

It only takes a short leap to connect the feeding of the Hebrews in exile and the feeding of the 5,000, with the Eucharist. From the barrenness of this world, we are invited to experience God's all-pervasive grace by receiving the New Manna which is the Lord's body and blood. One of the overarching themes of the feeding of the 5,000 and every miracle is this: God is here and now and He cares for us. He connects with us through worldly, material things. This miracle, therefore, is also sacramental.

This story also has a social element. Our Lord and Saviour says to His disciples, “You give them something to eat.” He also says the same to us. “Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome strangers, visit those who are sick and in prison.” In other words, “Do as I do.”

I can hear many amongst you asking yourselves: “How did Christ do it?” In a way we all kind of know the answer: Just like so many things we read in the Gospel, it is a mystery.

We will never know, of course, but our belief, our faith is that the whole of the cosmos is full of God's grace. As Metropolitan Kallistos Ware writes: "The entire cosmos is one vast burning bush, permeated by the fire of divine power and glory."

If this is true, then nothing is impossible. The feeding of well over 5,000 men, women, and children is a demonstration of this truth. Because God is the glue that holds everything together, and because God is the energy that runs through our lives and gives life to everything. In the hands of Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, a few loaves and a couple of fish were more than enough to feed all these people.

But let us return to the compassion of Christ, mentioned in today's Gospel reading. This compassion is not just compassion in its sentimental form; it is a manifestation of Jesus Christ's love toward His creation, which is man. God has always loved the world, He has always loved man, and He will keep on doing this. But for our Lord to be able to be moved to compassion and show this, it is also necessary for each of us to be appropriately receptive to His compassion and love.

Some of us still believe that the only things we need for our salvation are good works; such as praying, going to church, and performing charitable deeds. We should never forget though, that whatever we do we will always be sinners, as no person can beat his chest and proudly proclaim that he never sins.

Therefore we are unworthy of God, we are in a way unacceptable to God. But we still need to do those things which we consider are good works. This is so we can show our good character, and also because this is our way of showing God that we want to be saved, that we choose God, that we seek Him out, and that we love Him.

The only obstacle to performing good works is that those good works end up being performed automatically, routinely. Our good works become a habit. And when something becomes a habit, there is no love. All the love is gone.

That is why it is commendable for us to now and then sit down and take stock of things, to look deep inside our hearts, and ask ourselves whether our character is such that our Lord could be moved to compassion for us because of it.

To achieve the Lord's compassion we need only do one little thing. This little thing is of great importance and it represents everything. That which we need to do is to humble ourselves, we have to repent, and we need to have the fear of God within us. What we should not do is have feelings of self-importance, be arrogant, and be conceited.

And what happens then!!! The great miracle!!! We will be able to find God wherever we are. Regardless of what is going on in our lives, whether it be positive or negative, we will be able to feel the compassion of God. We will also be able to see how God will provide everything that our souls and bodies need.

For God, this is not difficult. If we truly believe in God, we know that it is not difficult for God to heal us from sickness, or to resolve and rectify our problems, whatever they might be. He can take care of everything. But for God to be able to do this we need to adopt a character that will kindle His compassion for us.

Finally, God has one overriding message for us: God and his kingdom are here and now, He loves us and He cares for us unconditionally, and He will always do so. And, if we recognise our very real spiritual hunger, he will feed us abundantly. Proud people cannot be fed for they will never admit their poverty. Arrogant people will not open their mouths because they will never admit that they are hungry. So remember: If we are humble and poor in spirit, God will always feed us.

Amen.