

Soul Food

In the name of the Christ who is God over all, dear friends: they say there's no such thing as a free lunch. And when operating according to the normal principles of this world, that's true. But yet, in today's Gospel it's exactly what we see: a crowd of some 5000 men together with an undetermined number of women and children receiving a free meal from Jesus – which I admit can't properly be called a *lunch* since it comes at the close of the day, but I think it still qualifies to disprove the proverb. When Jesus factors into the equation, there really is such a thing as a free meal.

And that's precisely what's being offered in today's Old Testament reading from the prophet Isaiah: free food; rich, satisfying food; at no cost whatsoever to the consumer. It sounds too good to be true. So, what's going on here? What is this passage about?

To answer, it will be helpful to quickly review the overall message of Isaiah and how the book of his prophecy is laid out. It's a long book, 66 chapters in all. The first 39 of them contain mostly bad news directed against the nation of Judah and in particular its capital, Jerusalem. Isaiah preaches God's impending judgments that are coming about due to the people's persistent idolatry and lawlessness. Their lack of morality is appalling, and the rich and privileged are taking advantage of the poor and needy. The prophet's task is to call these wicked people to repent, but he knows that in the end they won't. And so, the result will be that the Lord will allow them to be conquered, their city and God's temple destroyed, and the people cast out of the Promised Land and taken into exile in a foreign country. Like I said, it's pretty grim news.

But beginning at chapter 40 there's a seismic shift. A new theme is developed which continues to the end of Isaiah. It's about the Lord's promise of restoration. He's going to preserve a remnant of his people even in captivity whom he will cause once again to occupy the Promised Land. They will rebuild the holy city of Jerusalem and the temple of the Lord. And the thing to understand is that what's being described operates on two levels. On one hand it refers to the end of the actual exile and the physical rebuilding of Jerusalem and God's temple within it. This happened 500 years before the birth of Jesus. It's a matter of historical record. But on a deeper level, Isaiah is pointing ahead to the new and greater Jerusalem that's going to be built which is the Church of Jesus Christ. The rebuilding of the earthly and merely temporary kingdom points ahead to the greater reality: the building of the spiritual and eternal kingdom of God.

Okay, with that in mind, we recognize that today's text comes from the latter, happier, and more hopeful part of Isaiah. So, we're expecting something good. And what the prophet does is to take us, his hearers, to the market. Let me unpack that a bit. When we think of a market, we think of your typical modern supermarket. It's an enclosed, climate-controlled building with wide aisles stocked from floor to as high as you can reach (and sometimes higher) with all kinds of mostly prepackaged and canned goods. There's a refrigerated meat case with carefully trimmed cuts wrapped neatly in clear plastic, similar cases for fresh milk and cheese products, a frozen food section where you can find everything from pizza to ice cream, and also a bakery and fresh produce section. Everything is neat, clean, and orderly. You load up your shopping cart and buy the stuff all in one place at the checkout counter at the front of the store.

But such supermarkets are relatively recent innovations. For most of the world's history (and still today in many places), a market is simply an open area somewhere in the middle of the

town. On it various vendors set their up booths or tables on which they display goods of all descriptions. There're no freezers or refrigerators. Nothing is prepackaged. There are no name brands. In the butchers' stalls (there'd be several of them) hang whole sides of beef, lamb, and goat. They cut hunks off at your request. The chickens and other poultry are likely still alive, kept in cages. You can take a bird home as is or have the butcher dispatch and gut it for you there on the spot. Last night's catch of seafood (at least you hope it's that recent) hangs from hooks in the fishmongers' stalls. Lots of different merchants are selling the same kinds of produce – whatever happens to be in season. And they're competing with each other for customers by hawking their wares, calling out loudly and claiming how fresh and modestly priced their stuff is, and how all their competitors are trying to rip you off and sell you garbage. Prices are negotiable. You have to haggle with the seller over every purchase. The overall scene is one of barely organized chaos. It's noisy, smelly, crowded, and confused. Flies are buzzing around everywhere. And the ground is absolutely filthy. It's littered with blood, animal droppings, bits of rotting vegetables, and who knows what else. Trust me when I say that the five second rule does not apply here.

This is the picture that Isaiah wants you to see. You're in such a market, a great big one, likely in the city of Jerusalem. But this isn't where you buy your groceries. This is the marketplace of ideas. It's the emporium of competing philosophies and world religions. It's the fair of delights, distractions, and entertainments. In some cases, it's the bazaar of the bizarre. It's all that stuff that's constantly coming at you vying for your time and attention, all the "isms" that want to make you their disciple and instruct you in their ways: humanism, secularism, rationalism, pragmatism, feminism, populism, narcissism, modernism, post-modernism, higher criticism, environmentalism, veganism, libertarianism, isolationism, workaholicism, plain old alcoholism, eroticism, and the ever popular hedonism to name quite a few but nowhere near all. They're all calling out to you, trying to get you to buy what they're selling – maybe even offering free samples just to give you a taste and maybe get you hooked. They're offering you love, hope, health, happiness, prosperity, security, and a better future. They're promising you your best life now. And all around you, you see other customers being taken in by these sales pitches. They're buying up whatever's being sold.

And somewhere in all this noise and confusion, probably shoved way over to one corner of the market, stands the prophet Isaiah at his little table. He too is calling. But he's not selling anything. No, what he offers is free of charge. "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear that your soul may live."

What's Isaiah got? It's the Word and Promises of the Lord God; his Gospel of salvation in Christ Jesus. It's the work Jesus did for you by his life, innocent death, and resurrection. It's the forgiveness of sins in his name. That's food for the soul. That's what your soul needs to live and to thrive and to grow. And it's the only thing that will do. He asks, "Why are you wasting your money on that which is not bread?" And what's worth noting is that the Hebrew word for bread is "Lechem". It literally means "for life" or rather "for lives" – it's plural. The reason for that is that bread was the staple food. It's what everyone lived on. And so in the same way that you need bread to fuel your body, the Word and Promises of God in Christ are the fuel that your soul needs to survive. All that other junk isn't bread for the soul. Consume as much as you want of it and you'll still be hungry. No, you'll still be starving to death.

But it isn't just bread for the soul that Isaiah is offering. He's got milk and wine and what he calls rich food. This is the good stuff. It comes in a variety of tastes and textures. There's milk for infants in the faith; that would be the basics – which in a sense we never outgrow the need for. But

there's so much more as you delve deeper into God's Word. There are endless delicacies and delights for the grownups – for those who are open to developing a more sophisticated palate. It's important that we do so. The Lord never intends for us to remain babes in the faith. He wants us to grow toward maturity.

Regarding the merchandise being offered on Isaiah's table, there're a couple things I want to highlight. First that it's an open invitation. He makes his appeal to *everyone* who thirsts and hungers. And make no mistake, everyone *is* thirsting and hungering. They are looking for something to satisfy the longing of their souls. The trouble is that they're trying to do it with all that other stuff. And we do too at times. Now, I'm not saying that we shouldn't have other pursuits and interests, but we need to remember where to find what we need the most, where the true and only food for the soul is to be found. It's at Isaiah's table – which I hope you see is a picture of the Church of Jesus Christ. That's where the Word and Promises of God in Christ Jesus are distributed.

Second, note that the organ of reception of this soul food is the ear. Isaiah stresses diligent listening, inclining the ear, and hearing. You receive food for your body through your mouth. The food for your soul you receive through the ear. Faith, saving faith, comes by hearing the Word of God. It's the means by which the Holy Spirit creates faith and fills hungry hearts. Interestingly enough, though, in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, you receive true food for the soul through both your mouth *and* your ears.

Third, Isaiah stresses that what he's got he's offering for free. And it's here that someone might object: "How can you say it's free? I'm pretty sure that you won't forget to pass the collection plate later, Pastor." I beg to differ. This food for your soul *is* free. You cannot buy the Baptism by which you were cleansed and made a child of God. You cannot purchase Christ's body and blood to eat and drink. There's no price attached to it. You can't buy the forgiveness of sin (true, for a while some in the Church tried it; but the Reformation was about fixing that). You can't pay for the rightly taught and proclaimed Word of God. These things *are* free. And if you didn't have a penny to your name, you could still come and receive them.

If God has blessed you with material wealth, and if you decide freely to make an offering, it doesn't go toward buying anything from God. His food for your soul is free. Your offering goes toward other things like making sure you have a clean and comfortable place to sit and consume your meals, toward employing someone like myself to prepare and serve your meals to you, toward the music that enhances your dining experience, and toward the publicity that encourages those who are still starving and thirsting for true soul food to find it here or wherever else it's being served.

The Lord's offer of food for the soul is open to all and it's free. And he tells us why he makes it: "that your soul may live." It's his desire that all come to the knowledge of the truth of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus by his passion, death, and resurrection and so be saved eternally through faith in him. And to those who hear his call and come to his table he promises to make an everlasting covenant: the same sure and steadfast covenant that he made for love of his servant David. What covenant was that? It was to place upon the throne of his restored kingdom (the Church) a King in the line of David who would rule forever, a King who was also God's Son, a King who would be the Savior. This he has done. And it's through him that God's food for souls is served. It's the feast of salvation, the very Bread of Life. Whenever and as often as he calls to the table, may we eagerly come running to get it. In Jesus name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!