

Taught By God

In the name of him who has the Words of eternal life, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Gospel lesson is the center section of Jesus' Bread of Life discourse. We heard the beginning of it last week. Next week we'll hear the end of it. You might think they'd give it to us all at once; but by breaking it into sections like the lectionary committee did, it forces us to concentrate on some of the finer details of what Jesus is saying. That's never a bad thing.

So, let's get into it. This takes place in a synagogue in Capernaum the day after Jesus fed the 5000 with the five loaves and two fish. Recall that Jesus and his disciples had tried to get away for a short vacation. They set sail for a remote beach on the northeast side of the Sea of Galilee. Unbeknown to them, a large crowd followed along the shore, arriving at their intended destination ahead of them. Instead of just sailing on (like I probably would have), Jesus had compassion on these people who were so desperate to hear him. He spent the day teaching them, feeding their hungry souls. When it was getting late Jesus knew that he had to feed their bodies too. That's when he performed the miracle of the multiplying loaves of bread. The crowd was amazed. More than that, they thought they had found the solution to one of life's most pressing problems: getting enough food to eat. This was a huge issue in the ancient world when all the work was done by hand and there were no modern fertilizers and pesticides and what not. And here was a guy who could make food appear as if out of thin air. They thought they'd hit the jackpot. They wanted to make Jesus their king.

At sunset, they watched as Jesus directed his disciples to get into their boat and sail back to Capernaum. Jesus himself didn't go with them. He went up on a hill to pray. So, the crowd camped at the base of the hill. They were hoping that when Jesus came back down in the morning he'd feed them breakfast. They went to sleep with visions of sugarplums dancing through their heads, imagining what their lives would be like now that they didn't have to work for food anymore.

They were disappointed. In the wee hours of the morning while they all slept soundly, Jesus passed through their midst and walked out on the surface of the water to where the disciples were in the boat. They hadn't got very far because the wind was against them. The moment Jesus stepped into the boat, however, the wind stopped. After that they made Capernaum in good time.

At daybreak the crowd awoke eagerly expecting their bread king to appear. They didn't know that Jesus had gone. So they waited, growing increasingly impatient – and hungry. I imagine that they sent a few scouts up the hill after a while to find Jesus and hurry him along. Eventually they figured out he wasn't there. With heavy hearts and empty bellies they returned to Capernaum only to discover that Jesus was there already teaching in the synagogue – and apparently he had been for some time.

They asked him, "When did you get here?" In typical Jesus style, he ignored their irrelevant question and got right to real point: "You are seeking me not because you saw the signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal." They saw the sign: the miracle of the multiplying loaves. They were supposed to have understood what it meant, that in Jesus they were dealing with someone who

is far more than mere man. But they didn't get it. All they cared about was that they ate. And they wanted to do it again.

But Jesus had spoken of laboring for food, so they asked him, "What must we do, to be doing the work of God?" It's like, yeah, sure. What do we have to do to get this divine bread of yours that endures to eternal life? Jesus told them, "The work of God is this: that you believe in the One he sent." There is no work involved on your part. Just believe in me.

They replied "Believe in you, huh? Okay. But you'll have to give us sign to prove that we *should* believe in you. Let's see ... what could you do? Oh! We know! You could make more bread appear and feed us all again!" Their motive was pretty transparent. They didn't understand the sign the first time. They're not likely to get it the second time around. All they want to do is eat. Their focus is on their immediate temporal needs. Jesus is trying to give them something much greater; but they're not having any of it.

This is where today's Gospel picks up the conversation. Jesus tells them, "I am the Bread of Life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst." He adds that they're looking right at him. They've seen the signs – and yet they do not believe. He tells them "I have come down from heaven to do my Father's will, which is to save those whom the Father has given me and I will raise them up on the Last Day. The Father's will is that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life.

They don't like this. They grumble among themselves, "Who does this guy think he is? Mr. Big Shot come down from God. That's just silly. We know his parents. This is just Jesus the carpenter's son. "Come down from God" pfft. He's off his rocker.

And yet, while they don't believe his words, they expect him to perform a miracle for them. They want free bread; but not the Bread of Life which is also free. Jesus explains the problem of their unbelief. He says no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. Faith in Jesus is a gift. Right understanding God's Word is a gift of the Spirit; but it's a gift that comes from hearing his teaching. And they are rejecting his teaching. They don't want to hear it.

It's at this point that Jesus reaches back into the Old Testament, to the prophet Isaiah, to explain what's really going on as he speaks. It's the passage where the Lord says through the prophet, "Your children will be taught by God." This is direct teaching, not through the mouth of a prophet, but literally out of the mouth of God. That's what's happening as Jesus speaks to them. God in flesh is teaching. The divine Word in flesh is teaching. He is the true Bread of Life – for man does not live on bread, but by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

It's helpful to know that In Hebrew the word for bread is "lechem". It means "for life"; actually it's plural, so "for lives". It was their staple food. It's what people lived on. But no matter how much "for life" you have or consume, you're still going to die one day. In calling himself the Bread of *Life*, Jesus is saying that he's the "for life" of *Life with a capital L*, eternal life. Eat *this* bread and live forever. Eat *this* bread and never die.

And then to pinpoint precisely what he means, Jesus, God in flesh, proclaims this "bread that will give for the life of the world is my flesh." He means his crucifixion, of course: his death as the atoning sacrifice for our sin. This teaching, this Word direct from the mouth of God, is the "for life" of Life eternal.

Sadly, those hungry souls who heard God in flesh teach in the synagogue that day wanted nothing to do with it. They were offended by his teaching. They wanted to see miracles. They were only concerned about their temporal needs. And same is true of most people today. Well, it's true all of us to some degree. It's a trap we need to avoid.

Because, as this episode proves, miracles don't create faith in Jesus. These people saw the miracle; but they refused to believe Jesus who performed it. And bread, food that perishes, will only sustain a person in this life. All those folks have long since passed away. And unless Jesus returns in the interim, one day so will you.

By God's grace you are here today because you have been drawn by the Father. You've received the gift of his Holy Spirit. You believe in Jesus and what he did for the life of the world. And through the ministry of his Holy Church the prophecy of Isaiah is still being fulfilled. You are being taught by God. Jesus told those he sent to proclaim his word, "Who hears you, hears me." Therefore through the words I speak of Jesus, of his life, of his death, and of his resurrection, *you* are receiving the Bread of Life, and by it, Jesus will raise you up on the Last Day. Don't reject it. Don't despise it. Rather cherish it. Be thankful for it. And may this be our continual prayer, "Lord, give us this Bread always". In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!