

O Captain, My Captain

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: The events described in this morning's Gospel follow immediately after the miraculous feeding of the 5000, which we heard about last week. Recall that Jesus and the disciples had attempted to take a short break from the crowds that had been pressing them. They were so busy dealing with people and their problems that they had no time to rest or even to eat. So, early one morning while it was still dark, before the crowds began to assemble and launch yet another assault on their weary frames and sleep deprived minds, Jesus told his disciples to load up the boat and set sail for a deserted stretch of beach on the northeastern side of the Sea of Galilee. The plan was to take a little mini-vacation and recharge their batteries before starting up again.

It didn't happen. Some early-birds saw what they were up to and spread the word. So as Jesus and the disciples sailed off, the mobs who wanted to see Jesus walked along the shoreline, keeping their sail in sight. When Jesus and his men arrived at their supposedly secret hideaway, they found a huge crowd already waiting for them. As tempting as it might have been to just get back into the boat and keep on sailing, Jesus knew he couldn't do that. He saw that the people were like sheep without a shepherd and he had compassion on them. They had come to see him, to hear him; and he would not disappoint them. He spent the rest of the day filling these hungry souls with the heavenly truths he taught.

As it was nearing evening their souls were full; but their stomachs were empty. They'd gone all day without eating. And Jesus had compassion on them for this need too. Turning to his disciples, he told them it was *their* turn to feed the crowd. He directed them to give these hungry people something to eat. The disciples couldn't believe their ears. "We only have five loaves of bread and two small fish", they protested. "That'll do", replied Jesus. And pronouncing his blessing on this seemingly meager food supply, he gave it to the disciples who distributed it to the crowd. Everyone ate their fill. All were satisfied. The disciples had seen the impossible happen – indeed, they had been part of making it happen. It was a miracle of Jesus, but the loaves and fishes multiplied in the hands of the disciples as they were distributing them. It turned out to be quite an eventful day.

And now, at sunset, Jesus instructs his disciples to get back into the boat and head west to Bethsaida. He stayed behind to dismiss the crowd with a final blessing. And having done this, he climbed a nearby hill. There he spent most of the night in prayer.

Meanwhile, the disciples were having a tough time. They had enjoyed a steady westerly breeze when they sailed to that remote shore; but now they were headed directly into the wind. And it had increased significantly. Taking turns straining at the oars, it was all they could do to maintain their position. They labored all night without making much headway. By the fourth and last watch, which is between 3:00 AM and sunrise, they were still only a few hundred yards from where they'd started. It must have frustrating. I mean, they were already worn out – that's why they tried to get away for a break. And now they were enduring yet another sleepless night full of exhausting work. They're cold and wet from the spray of the whitecaps splashing over the bow; their hands are raw, blistered, and bleeding; their muscles are sore and achy; and it's a safe bet that they're crabby, short tempered, and snapping at each other. And they have nothing to show for it. Every forward advance is pushed back by the wind.

From his vantage point on the hill, Jesus sees them in the moonlight. He sees how hard they're working and how little they've traveled. He decides that now is the time to act. Descending the hill, he steps across the beach and right on to the surface of the lake. Amazingly, he doesn't sink or have to swim. Instead, with each step he defies the Law of Gravity. And in short order, having expended almost no effort, he's caught up to where the disciples are. Our text suggests that the path he's taken demonstrates that his intention is to walk right past them without even so much as a "How do you do?"

But the disciples have seen this mysterious figure moving across the surface of the lake and coming closer to them. They're convinced that it's a spirit of some kind. Sailors always have their superstitions, and this one plays right into some of the scariest ones. They are certain that death is coming to claim them. They begin to cry out in terror.

In response to their cries, Jesus calls to them, "Take heart. It is I. Do not be afraid." They recognize his voice, which helps calm them a bit; and as he moves closer, yes, sure enough, it's Jesus. He steps over the gunwale into the boat – and the instant he does, the wind they'd been fighting all night suddenly stops. The disciples are utterly dumbfounded. And why? Was it because they saw Jesus walk on water? No. Was it because the wind suddenly stopped? Again, no. Why then were their minds in such total confusion? Well, if we are to believe St. Mark (and that's a good idea because he's the divinely inspired writer), it's because they didn't understand about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.

Wait ... What? What does their lack of understanding about loaves of bread have to do with their present situation? It doesn't seem to make any sense. And it's tempting to shrug our shoulders and pass by a strange comment like this without giving it much thought; but if we did, then we'd be in the same boat as the disciples who didn't understand. So let's not harden our hearts. Let's dig a little deeper and try to understand what the Holy Spirit is telling us with these strange words. If we do, we will be rewarded.

Let's begin with the loaves of bread. What was the message the disciples didn't understand about them? Well, as we learned last week, the miraculous feeding of the 5000 was much more than a show of Jesus' divine power. It was also a sign – an illustration – by which Jesus was teaching his disciples how to be servants of his Church. You see, Jesus knew that he would soon be going to Jerusalem, there to give his life on the cross for the sins of the world. He knew he would rise again and appear to his disciples. And he knew that he was going to commission them to be his Apostles to go forth declaring the forgiveness of sins and eternal life in his name. He was going to make them his under-shepherds and entrust them with the feeding and care of God's flock. And so he was, even now, preparing them for that mission.

The feeding of the 5000 was a teaching tool. By it Jesus taught his disciples two important lessons. First, that as a servant of Christ, you don't get to choose when to take care of God's people. You feed them when they're hungry. You attend their needs when they have them – even if it's inconvenient to you. Second, and more importantly, the miracle showed the disciples what they were to use to feed God's people: just five loaves of bread and two small fish; nothing more. As we heard last week, the numbers and items are symbolic. Five stands for the Word of God – the True Bread of Life from heaven; and the two stands for the Sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper – the fleshly, physical means by which God feeds hungry souls with Christ. That's all a minister of the Church has to do the job. It's tempting to think (like the disciples did) that it's not enough. But in the hands of Jesus and blessed by him, it's always enough to feed as many as come to the table. The minister's task is to take *only* the five loaves and two fish and put them into the hands of Jesus; to let Jesus be the sum and

substance of both as he preaches the Word and administers the Sacraments. It isn't about what he as a man can do. It's not about his fine words or good looks or charming personality. It's about Jesus. It's about his perfect life, his death for sin, and the power of his resurrection. The under-shepherd of Christ who understands that his task is to deliver Jesus to his people in Word and Sacrament will always have enough to feed them. That was the teaching point of the miracle; but the disciples did not yet understand it. Their sin-hardened hearts wouldn't understand until after the resurrection of Jesus, until after he gave them his Holy Spirit and opened their hearts and minds to see and understand many things they had previously been incapable of comprehending.

They didn't understand that the miracle of the loaves was a lesson for them about how to serve the Church; and that's why they didn't understand that their miserable night in the boat was yet another lesson Jesus wanted to teach them about serving the Church. Back up and see the big picture: We've got the twelve disciples of Jesus in a boat headed west. It's an illustration of the Church. It's the Ark containing the people of God. Outside the boat is drowning and death. The boat is headed west – away from the wilderness toward the Promised Land. And it's night: an appropriate description of this dark age which we are all sailing through in the safety of the Ark of the Church. Do you see the picture?

If so, then you'll see the point of the lesson is that they don't have Jesus onboard. And how does that work out for them? It doesn't. Without Jesus in the boat with them, they aren't going anywhere. No matter how hard they work, no matter how much effort they expend, they're never going to make it to the other side. But now here comes Jesus; specifically Jesus walking on the water, which is death. It's an illustration of how he defeated death. Of course, he hasn't done it yet; but he will have by the time the disciples figure out what this lesson is all about. But the point is that it's not just any Jesus who gets into the boat; it's the Jesus who by his death for sin defeated death for us. And having died, death no longer has dominion over him. That's what is pictured by his walking on the water. And the moment *this* Jesus gets into the boat, the wind stops. Now forward progress is easy. The Ark of the Church is underway once again, carrying its passengers to the eternal Promised Land.

Every ship needs a captain: a man in charge who is responsible for the ship, its crew, its passengers, and its mission. The captain of the Holy Christian Church is Jesus. If Jesus isn't in the boat with us, we aren't going anywhere. The church is dead in the water, and no amount of human effort is going to move it. This is the lesson the disciples had to learn; and it's one that we need to learn and remember as well.

Now, you may be thinking, "Well, duh! Who's going to try to operate the church without Jesus?" The answer is that it's a whole lot more common than you might think. In every major city in this country there is a "mega-church" – maybe several of them. These are congregations of upwards of 7000 members. Some have more than 50,000. But they follow pretty much the same formula. In these churches you won't hear about your sin and your need for a Savior. That's depressing. It turns people off. No, what you'll hear about is your great untapped potential, your need to believe in yourself, and the happiness and success you can have if you only trust God to give it to you. If Jesus is mentioned, they'll hold him up as a moral example for you to try to imitate. He's your life coach to show you how it's done. Good luck with that. Perfection is a pretty high bar. But the formula works. People love to be encouraged. We want to hear about how terrific we are, and how much potential we have, and oh, the heights we might be able to attain if we only think positively about ourselves!

This is exactly the opposite of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus didn't come to encourage us. Sinners don't need encouragement. If you encourage sinners, what do you get? More sin. No, Jesus came to put to death the sin in us. He did that by uniting us with him in his bloody death on the cross, so that he could raise us again to new and holy life with him. A church that doesn't condemn sin can't call sinners to repentance and to faith in the Savior. So, while very successful in the eyes of the world these mega churches aren't going anywhere. They are perfect examples of Christ-less Christianity – which is not Christianity at all.

The problem is not limited to these non-denominational mega churches. Even in many traditional, mainstream churches, you are more likely to hear sermons that tell you “how to be a better person or a better Christian” than you are to hear a message condemning your sin, calling you to repent, and setting forth the crucified and risen Lord Jesus as your Savior. And there are other ways to leave Jesus behind and try to operate the church without him. One is to deny the truth and authority of God's Word. Another is to deny the presence of Christ in the Word and Sacraments. Still another is to reject the truth of his resurrection from the dead. To the extent that individual churches and whole denominations do this, they are kicking Jesus out of the boat.

And don't think that it can't happen to us. The sin nature in all of us resists being condemned and killed. When confronted with God's holy Law it offers excuses. It looks for loopholes. It wants to accent the positive. It wants to focus on what I can do, how good I am, and how much I'm doing for the Lord. In short, it wants to imagine that it can go it alone without the Captain aboard the ship. It wants to try to cross over to the other side without him. That will never work. Without our Captain, all our effort will be wasted. We need Jesus onboard the Ark of the Church—and not just any Jesus: not Jesus the helper, the guide, the life-coach, the example, or the encourager: but the *Savior* who by his death defeated death for us. With him onboard, we are guaranteed a safe passage through life and through death, to the life of the world to come. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!