

Laetare Sunday Sermon

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“When Jesus therefore perceived that they would come and take him by force, to make him a king, he departed again into a mountain himself alone.” (Jn 6:15)

The feeding of the 5,000 reveals the mercy and power of Christ on a grand scale. It is a dramatic moment, the only miracle recorded in all four gospels. But even as it establishes divine pity and generosity, it also uncovers the imperfect affection of those who had just been the beneficiaries of Our Lord’s kindness. The people recognize Jesus as the Messiah, but they understand His sovereignty in earthly terms: He is a *solution* to the problems of today, and not first a God to be *loved*...and that is why Jesus departs from them.

St. John Chrysostom put it this way: “See what the belly can do...all their zeal for God is fled, now that their bellies are filled.” The people, now satisfied, want to make Christ king...but for the wrong reason, indeed a selfish one.

“My kingship is not of this world,” Jesus will later tell Pontius Pilate. And so after the multiplication of the loaves and fish, Our Lord escapes, having failed to elicit the right response in the hearts of the chosen people. “For the Kingdom of God,” St Paul reminds us, “is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” (Rom 14:17) In this episode from the Gospel, the enthusiasm of the people contrasts with the disappointment of their Savior.

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Sometimes when I am giving a talk to young people about the nature of love, I try to make a point about the way we use the word “love” by comparing two statements: “I love you,” and “I love pizza.” Now we use the same word in both cases, with a certain innocence to be sure...but perhaps a bit carelessly, too, and maybe with a bit of self-disclosure. “I love pizza” means, “I love what pizza does for me,” and that is fine, as far as it goes. But the reality of our fallen and sometimes selfish human nature is that we can love *people* with “pizza love”...“I love you” can mean, “I love what you do for me.” And that is “love” as self-gratification, and not as self-giving.

Jesus Christ lived an intensely happy human life, and His joy followed from a perfect and pure union of hearts with His Father, which expressed itself in His self-forgetfulness and self-gift. Since we are made in God’s image and likeness, we can find our peace and joy, not in food and drink (themselves metaphors for all created goods), but in righteousness, or holiness, as St Paul said, which means imitating the Son and with the help of His abundant grace, *giving* our hearts generously...and not in a form of commercial exchange: “I will do this for you, and you will do this for me.”

Let’s return to today’s Gospel. Jesus flees the crowd in sorrow. He performs an act of love in the hope of being loved in return. But our eyes, fixed upon the gift, have forgotten the giver or benefactor. How much does each of us wish to be loved for who we are and *not* for what we can do! Should we not think the same of Jesus Christ...that He wants us to love Him for who He is, and not only for what He does for us? This is purity of heart.

The Greek Biblical term for sin literally means, “missing the mark.” In other words, when we sin, we get things out of order...we invest an immoderate hope in something that cannot supply what we desire. At that moment of sin, Christ is no longer the alpha and the omega...we allow a created good or a creature to take the place of the Creator. Whether it is something to satisfy the mind, the heart, or the senses, if we expect more from something or from someone that it or he or she can furnish, then our desire will turn to ashes. We suffer a self-inflicted wound; we have things out of order; we have missed the mark...that is a good definition of sin.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Our Lord said, ““For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Mt 6:21) And this, dear people, frames the purpose of Lent: you and I must search our hearts in all humility and courage to see just in what treasure we have invested our affection, our time, our attention. This is why we say that Lent is a time of purification: with the help of grace, we want to verify the quality of our love for Jesus Christ...to love Him for who He is, not simply for what He can do.

It is not, of course, a Catholic way of thinking to disdain the things of this world. Christ did not do this. Our Lord earnestly urged us, however, to give our hearts only to Him and to love others for His sake. "Do not labor for the food which perishes..." (Jn 6:27), He will say just a few verses later in the Gospel from the passage for today's Mass. And in His goodness, Jesus promised that if we keep things in the right order, if we love Him first and most, He will take care of everything: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well." (Mt 6:33) May our faith and our charity be true and pure, in harmony with His divine instruction.

Today is Laetare Sunday, from the first word of the Introit: "Laetare, Jerusalem..." Rejoice, Jerusalem. The Mass vestments have softened one hue from violet to rose in anticipation of the delight of a purified heart that will rejoice in the Paschal Mystery soon to come. The fruit of that purification is Christ's joy, Easter joy. Now is the time for me to give my heart to Jesus Christ *unconditionally*. This is how I recognize His sovereignty and become a citizen in the Kingdom of God.

Sacred Scripture is the story of a romance...the story of a pure and generous Heart, that came down from Heaven, mounted the Cross to free me from my selfishness and the burden of sin and a bad conscience to which that selfishness leads, that rises triumphantly from the grave and ascends into Heaven, and then returns at each Mass to give Himself to me in the Eucharist, which the miracle of the loaves prefigures. This is the quality of the love of Jesus Christ for me...a "love so amazing, so divine, [that] demands my soul, my life, my all."