

*There is a lad here, which hath five barley-loaves, and two small fishes; but what are they among so many?*

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Today's Gospel challenges us to ask ourselves what we really want in life. Or, in the terms that John speaks of, we are challenged to ask ourselves what it is that we most hunger for.

For the crowd following Jesus that day, their hunger was for a bit of food to tide them over until they could get back home.

But you may be hungering for some of the many things that we've always taken for granted: the freedom to get out and move around; the freedom to gather as family and friends; the freedom to go where we want to go and buy what we want to buy.

For many of you it may be hunger for certainty in these uncertain times, and security in the face a whole lot of fear and doubt and worry.

But the first thing to remember in these challenging, uncertain, times is that whatever it is that you hunger for, God cares deeply about it. If there's one thing to be said for certain about today's Gospel reading, it is surely this: God cares about all your hopes and fears and hunger.

And the early church apparently knew that well because this story of the feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle story of Jesus that is told in all four gospels.

For those early Christians, it clearly got to the heart of something that they knew was important about Jesus, about who He was and what He was up to.

Perhaps one reason for this is obvious: hunger is a universal experience. From the moment we're born we are faced with it. It confronts all of us at one time or another.

But, as much as this today's Gospel tells us that God cares about all our many different hungers, it also reminds us that bread is only part of the solution.

Today's Gospel also speaks very loudly about what will be, at times, our confusion regarding what it is that we actually do need.

A large crowd was following Jesus, John tells us. But John also tells us why they were following: "They saw the signs which he did on those who were diseased."

Great crowds follow Jesus because He heals them.

He meets their needs.

No more so, of course, than in the story which follows.

A crowd follows Christ, and they're hungry.

So Jesus looks at His followers, just as looks at the likes of you and me today, and he asks,

"So what are we going to do here?"

How are we going to deal with this problem of hunger?"

It's clear that Philip reaches for the usual kinds of answers, the usual categories and expectations.

He begins to calculate how much money they need to buy supper for all these folks.

He begins to work on logistics.

"Half a year's pay cheques won't do the trick.

Our budget just isn't big enough.

Our resources are just too few."

But Jesus knows that conventional answers aren't what's called for.

And that's when Andrew walks up.

"Well, there's this kid with some barley loaves and a couple of fish."

Andrew looks at who's around; at who's on hand; at what's available.

And what's available is the lunch of a boy whose clearly not a power broker, not someone with rank; because barley flour is the flour that poor folks used for their loaves, not what the rich folks used. It's a little detail that only John mentions.

Perhaps Andrew sees that real needs aren't necessarily filled by the folks that we've often looked to to meet them; perhaps even that real needs won't be met in the things we've tried to use in the past to meet them.

That seems to be the sub-text in this morning's Gospel; because it's just at the point when Jesus' sign seems to be having the greatest impact, when His success seems secure, that Jesus, in effect, runs away.

Perhaps what Jesus is saying is this:

Don't spend your lives on food that spoils. Don't stock the shelves of your life with perishables.

Put me there instead.

Make me your staple, the food that's going to last.

When you're hungry," says Jesus, "then reach first for me."

God won't fulfil our every desire but God can and will provide all that we need.

He cares for us even more than we care for ourselves: *give us this day our daily bread*, he teaches us to pray.

But he also offers something more; not something that will leave us empty and hungry afterwards, but something far more substantial.

It is strange food, this bread called Jesus.

We begin to digest it till it becomes part of us.

But then this bread of life does something else, something that ordinary bread doesn't do.

This bread, this food, this Jesus begins to make us part of Him.

And in that process, we ourselves become non-perishable.

We ourselves become food for the world.

You may be hungry right now

If not for food, you may be hungry for any for any number of things.

But if we're learning anything in these challenging days, perhaps we're learning this:

That so much that seemed important to us may be not nearly as important as we thought.

Perhaps what's most important is the time that we get to spend together: listening and hearing; comforting and caring; being the Body of Christ in a frightened and confused world.

It's the real food that matters, the real food that counts. And only Jesus can give us that.