

VESPERS HOMILY
JULY 17, 2016

MARK 6: 1 – 21

PSALM 14

As you may know, the first parish I served as a priest was here at Christ Church. It was in 1987 and I was just out of seminary at Nashotah House. I was called as Chaplain to Valdosta State College and assistant to the rector, Henry Louttit, both of which, I was soon to learn, were full-time jobs.

Nashotah was, and probably is, very conservative and traditional in its liturgy. Christ Church was best called “creative,” perhaps “eclectic.” Henry, who was ably assisted by Pam Guice, a wonderfully creative and artistic helper, was given to some local variations on Prayer Book liturgy that were quite new to me.

Yet it all seemed normal until my first All Saints’ Day. For that occasion, one of the principal celebrations of the Eucharist, at least so in my experience, I rather expected a little incense and perhaps some saintly singing, a bit of transcendence. Actually, I found everybody wearing a paper crown from Burger King. The word Burger King was covered by a piece of paper with the name of a saint. Everybody wore a badge with name of another saint and each window of the church held an icon of some saint. Personally, I was surprised to put it mildly, but the congregation seemed not to find it unusual.

Being occasionally flexible, the next year on All Saints’ Day, in the spirit of the moment, I fashioned my Burger King crown with a pair of Viking horns and the name badge of Harald Bluetooth, who was, as I am sure you know, the Twelfth Century King of Denmark under whom Christianity was introduced to the Scandinavian countries. For some reason Henry seemed to disapprove of my innovation; He said that I didn’t understand holiness.

My first Christmas at Christ Church was equally memorable. There were some wonderful customs some of which continue to this day. At the early children’s service all the figures for the nativity, animals, shepherds, wise men, holy family and baby Jesus, were processed by children and placed in the creche at the beginning of the service. There was, and is, a candle lighting service in which children placed candles in a big box filled with sand. As I recall there was a fire extinguisher readily available.

I will admit that I am a bit hazy on some of these details but one stands out very clearly. It had to do with communion bread. At some point in the past, I have no idea when, the usual communion wafer had been superseded by “real bread;” Henry was an advocate of “real bread.” At the Christmas children’s service the “real bread” was replaced with something called “monkey bread,” little balls of dough held together by a sticky syrup all covered with granulated sugar. You can imagine how that mixture might appeal to a child.

In theory each little ball of bread could be detached and placed in the fingers of a delighted child. The problem was, of course, that the syrup that held the bread together also held together the fingers on the one administering communion making it very difficult to pass it along to the child. After a few attempts the sugar and bread began to stick to our fingers and then, from the sticky fingers of children fall on the kneeling carpet – I don't remember there being cushions at that time. Soon there was a sugary, crumby, consecrated layer all along the communion rail.

After the children's service, and before the later service, it seemed like a good idea to clean up the bits and pieces. Pam Guice and I got down and began picking up crumbs when, to our horror, Henry walked in with a small vacuum cleaner
"Stop," we cried; "You can't Dust Bust Jesus."

All of which, in a very circuitous way, brings me to today's reading from John. Why do you suppose, and this is a rhetorical question, was it important to gather up the crumbs after the 5000 had been fed "so that nothing may be lost?"

The significance of this particular reading is that only this incident, prior to Jesus' entry to Jerusalem is to be found in all four Gospels. It was a reading with great foundational meaning to the earliest Christian gatherings. It's important; why?

That is because it's a very, very early statement of the meaning of the Eucharist. It tells us something about the belief and the practice of the very earliest Christian communities. It's the foundational memory of the basis of worship.

In this reading Jesus, with His twelve disciples, is sought out by a large throng of weary people who are in need of His spiritual presence, just being with Him, as well as in need of physical sustenance, food.

They have walked a long way. They have followed Him on foot as He crossed the Sea of Galilee in a boat. Some have followed Jesus for His spiritual presence. Some have followed out of curiosity and for the excitement. All are hungry. What can Jesus do in the face of such need?

There are five barley loaves and two pickled fish, brought by a boy, apparently the only person with the foresight to bring supplies. The Eucharist always begins with gifts of bread and wine brought to the table. Apparently that was the custom of the early church as it is today.

A priest for whom I was the Deacon at Saint Anskar's in Hartland, Wisconsin, once pointed out that if the boy had said, "Not with my lunch you won't," we might not be sitting here.

What ensues is what Dom Gregory Dix called "The Shape of the Liturgy." Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks – the word in the Greek is *Eucharistesas*, a thanksgiving and a

blessing, breaks it and gives it to the people. In John's Gospel Jesus Himself gives the bread, sharing His physical presence with those that receive it. There is more than enough for all those in need to be fed. No one leaves either physically or spiritually hungry. Jesus shares the bread and shares Himself with them all.

In His actions all of that bread had been consecrated by His giving of thanks and by His touch. Each crumb was in itself consecrated; each crumb was in some way the body of Christ. Even now at the altar, after communion as the vessels are cleaned every bit of the sacrament is reverently consumed, acknowledging them to be the consecrated body and blood of Our Lord.

William Temple, who was arguably the most intelligent of all Archbishops of Canterbury, wrote in his book, *Readings in John's Gospel*: "It is unnecessary to draw a moral. The need of the world is not too great for our resources if it is the Lord who directs the use of those resources."

In His Holy Name.