

## **Feed the Crowd As a Sign of Divine Realm**

### *The Centrality of Compassion as a Clue to Christian Discipleship*

Matthew 14:13-21

Recalling last Sunday's homily on the five parables taught by Jesus regarding the kingdom of heaven provides a good entry into the present story. In his teaching about the realm of heaven in the light of the parable of the mustard seed, the parable of the yeast, the parable of the hidden treasure in the field, the merchant in search of fine pearls, and the net thrown into the sea, Jesus tried to show that understanding the reality of God's kingdom is a great undertaking that cannot be achieved by relying on our human efforts alone, but also relying on the power of divine grace sustained by faith (Matthew 13:31-33;44-52). Compared to other parables, these parables were characterized by their common feature which was very brief and succinct with no interpretative clues that seemed specific, explicit, and categorical about the realm of heaven. In the stories, sections regarding illustrations and interpretations were missing, which might have meant that Jesus seemed to have used the parables to offer a glimpse of the realm of heaven but refusing to draw his own conclusion about what heaven might look like, instead Jesus placed the glimpse of the realm of heaven on the readers themselves, so that they may be able to draw their own practical conclusions in the light of their lived experiences. As we engaged with the parables, we quickly realised that, our experiences, as human beings, are unique and that uniqueness has consequences on how the realm of heaven may be defined and envisioned. We realized that scholars were correct in suggesting that, compared with the other parables, may be the absence of illustrative features in the present parables seems to have provided an opportunity for us, as readers, to make sense of the comparison with the realm of heaven that Jesus introduced in each parable in the light of our lived experiences.

### **Treasures New and Old**

Both the old and the new are intertwined. The realm of heaven is made more apparent when those who have been trained for the kingdom make effort in translating understanding into action. Therefore, every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house-hold who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old (Matthew 13:51-52). In light of the specific scenario that each parable offered, we were expected to draw our connections about the realm of heaven in light of what we have learnt in the previous parables and take such learned lessons as key steps in making meaning of what each parable presents before us today. The parables invited us to model curiosity and creativity around the realm of heaven, to move beyond the attempt to try to see the realm of heaven as a factual experience, allowing it, instead to be explored from different angles and perspectives in the light of each person's lived experience. Each parable reconstructs and represents a specific feature of the realm of heaven which cannot be grasped by our human effort alone, requiring the power of faith. It is ever transient and invisible, hard to grasp and understand at one sight. Transience and invisibility stand as defining features of the realm of heaven. The progressive tonality of the story, within which these five parables are situated, represents the fluidity and complexity of the realm of heaven. Turning from farming to trading, fishing, and finally to our ability to bring forth treasures both new and old as epitome of Christian discipleship can only show how far the effort to understand the realm of heaven may be. The realm of heaven is fluid and complex requiring our human imagination and effort to bring it to reality and make it possible.

## Feeding the Multitude: Sanctifying , Breaking, and Sharing

In Matthew 14:13-21, the role of Jesus as a teacher, in Matthew 13, shifts into Jesus' role as a miracle worker when bread is sanctified, broken, and shared in fellowship. In our creative humanity, the fulfilment of God's kingdom is an act of solidarity and celebration. When bread is broken and shared in fellowship the kingdom of heaven is made near. The feeding of the multitude resonates the idea of Eucharist as an act of celebration and remembrance that make God's kingdom possible. The present is a familiar story and many have approached it differently. Because of its strong emphasis in addressing people's longing as the core of the gospel the place of compassion is often ignored or overlooked. We ignore the fact that after seeing the crowd, Jesus felt compassion for them. Because the feeding miracle is so catching and persuasive, we often emphasize the miracle itself to the extent of overlooking the sympathy that moves Jesus to the act of charity. For Matthew, Jesus' compassion compels him to act, to transform his sympathy into an act of justice. So, too, it should be so with those who aspire to follow him. At times, we may feel sympathy for someone but failing to translate our feelings into action. Jesus' disciples though might have felt compassion on the crowd they wanted Jesus to send them away by themselves. After teaching the crowds and instructing his disciples about the kingdom of heaven in chapter 13; in the present story Jesus makes the realm of heaven real through his acts of healing and works of miracle. The realm of heaven is matched by compassion and acts of solidarity, people share their resources, and there is plenty than enough for everyone in need. Sanctification, sharing, and fellowship are marks of the kingdom. The parables don't argue for truth itself but show that what is true about God and about ourselves might be disclosed in the act of our wrestling with, resisting, and being pulled into truth. As we wrestle with the present story, here we may find inspiration from the moral sentiment of a well-known academic, from India, winner of the Noble Prize in Economics, Amartya Sen, who shares the story of Bertrand Russell, who was a firm atheist, who was once asked what would he do if, following his death, he were to encounter God after all.' In Amartya Sen's view, 'Russel is supposed to have answered:'

“I will ask him: God Almighty, why did you give so little evidence of your existence?” Certainly, the appalling world in which we live does not – at least on the surface – look like one in which an all-powerful benevolent is having its way. It is hard to understand how a compassionate world order can include so many people afflicted by acute misery, persistent hunger and deprived and desperate lives, and why millions of innocent children have to die each year from lack of food or medical attention or social care.<sup>1</sup>

The miracle of Jesus feeding more than five thousand men, women, and children is a widely studied miracle. Some scholars focus on the blessing of the loaves and bread and suggest that this miracle is perhaps the precursor of the communion meal. Others focus on the satiated crowd or the symbolism of the twelve full baskets. While all of these observations are notable, the simple detail that Jesus did not send the people away is also remarkable. Instead of commanding them to leave, he orders them to stay and sit down on the grass. He then gets to work doing what he has come to do—curing every disease and sickness among the people. The multiplication of the loaves of bread and the fish harken to the previous parable that Jesus speaks to the crowd concerning the mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven produces a plentiful harvest from the smallest of seeds. Amartya Sen sees the conditions in which the world finds itself, and the question of what needs to be done in order to improve or remedy it, as laying at the authority of human beings themselves. Human beings themselves should

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<sup>1</sup> Sen, Amartya: *Development As Freedom*. Anchor Books, New York 1999, p. 282

strive in progressively making the evidence of God's existence more visible in the world by caring for the world as a way of caring for one another. The Good news is that Amartya Sen agrees that the issue of divine sovereignty has been the subject of some discussion among theologians. For Amartya Sen, the argument that God has reasons to want us to deal with these matters ourselves has had considerable intellectual support. However, as a nonreligious person, Sen insists that is not in a position to assess the theological merits of this argument. But he can appreciate the force of the claim that people themselves must have the responsibility for the development and change of the world in which they live. For Amartya Sen, one does not have to be either devout or nondevout to accept this basic connection.<sup>2</sup> The good news is that to some, the realm of heaven is invisible, but the promise of the parables about the realm of heaven is that even when the realm of heaven is not seen it is still near. That is a promise that all of us, including clergy, need to hear. In the same way that Jesus did not disclose the meaning behind of the last five parables in taught in Matthew 13 but expecting the disciples to draw their own conclusion the fact that Jesus asks the disciples not to send the crowd away but to feed them right there he also expects the disciples to imagine and explore the possibility of feeding the crowd themselves. The story does not detail how the hungry crowd is fed in the wilderness; only that no one leaves hungry. And so, the story invites us to use our imaginations to bring about the reality of God's kingdom right here and now.

### **The Reality of Wildness in the Struggle Against Covid-19 Pandemic**

Wildness is always depicted as a context where people retreat to in order to wrestle with powers that be but also to encounter God at last. It is a barren, deserted, and lonely. Wilderness experiences are at variance in terms of their context and extent, but always carry a biblical category of 40 days or 40 years. Though bareness, emptiness, and loneliness depict wildness categories, God is never absent. In this narrative, Jesus' time in the wilderness is cut short not by his own choosing, but by the crowds who follow him there. The story about Jesus' feeding of the multitude culminates in practical ways Jesus' teaching about the reality of God's kingdom. The parables depicted in a very vivid and challenging way the reality of the emptiness, nothingness, universality, and complexity of the realm of heaven as a clue to Christian discipleship. The realm of heaven is present even in circumstances where everything may seem to indicate its total absence. Its presence can still be made manifest even in small and invisible ways. Even in places where it may not be seen, it is near. The context of the of parables lingers on receptive learning as a model of Christian discipleship. As we journey with Jesus in this way, we are encouraged to make up our own parable on the realm of heaven, in the face of the challenges we face, in doing so we are making a critical connection between our perceived theological needs and our immediate contexts in which our lives are situated. In doing so, Jesus wants us to be honest as we share our own predicament, not trying to make anything up, that would make us look nice and kind, but that we are giving witness in the light what we face at the moment to a specific expression of faith. That we are offering testimony to what the realm of heaven needs to be in the light of our social and individual realities. Breaking bread together is a communal and sacramental act that echoes through scriptures and through the centuries. Sharing a meal is a primary means of creating and maintaining community. When Christians gather to break bread together, we remember and repeat Jesus' words and actions. In this sacred meal Christ satisfies our deepest hungers, heals our brokenness, binds us together as if one body, and strengthens us for service in the world. The reality of wildness in the struggle against Covid-19 pandemic is that Covid-19 pandemic might have disrupted our sense of fellowship but erase to the ground the power and

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<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, 1999, p. 282

meaning of this ancient story. Jesus continues to use his broken body and his wounds to bring us together and heals our own wounds.  
Amen