

Friday after the Epiphany

January 8, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

1 John 4:7–12; Psalm 72:1–8; Mark 6:30–44

The feeding of the five thousand is a story told in all four gospels. Instead of manna from heaven, Jesus himself looks up to heaven, then blesses and breaks the loaves. Then he divides two fish. All ate and were satisfied. A great deal of bread and fish was left uneaten.

But the beginning of today's gospel lesson is important too. The disciples have just returned from being sent out by Jesus in pairs to do the work that Jesus has been doing. They proclaimed the need to repent. They cast out demons. They anointed the sick with oil and healed them.¹ While they have been away, Mark inserts the story of the beheading of John the Baptist.²

When the twelve return, Jesus wants to be with them. But that is not to be. They've crossed to a lonely place by boat, but the crowds got there first. When Mark's Jesus sees them, he uses a phrase that echoes through the Old Testament. The people were "like sheep not have a shepherd."³ Moses and David were shepherds of sheep and people.

I've mentioned before that when quoting the New Testament in my writing, I usually draw attention to what it says. So, having been shown five loaves and two fish, "[Jesus] commanded [the twelve] to make all recline eating-group by eating-group on the green grass."⁴—in my experience from camping days when I was in my 30s, not a very comfortable position. Again, more was provided by Jesus than could be eaten.

¹ Mark 6:7–13.

² Mark 6:14–29.

³ Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8*, Anchor Bible 27 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 406.

⁴ Mark 6:39.

Tomorrow the story continues with another miracle designed to show to the twelve the Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Son of God.⁵ I want to remind us what had happened in Mark before Jesus sent his messengers—*ἀποστόλους*—apostles—out.

Jesus had been in the Gentile region of the Decapolis. His disciples heard his teaching,⁶ and they saw him healing people⁷ and calming wind and sea.⁸ Then he takes them to the in-Mark unnamed hometown—almost certainly Nazareth.⁹ It's worth noting that Mark describes Jesus not as Joseph's son but as 'the carpenter, the son of Mary.'¹⁰ Marian devotion is very early in the Christian community.¹¹ Jesus is not heard or seen by the people who know him from birth. They are "outsiders"—to use Professor Marcus' word.¹² They see but do not see, hear but do not understand another Old Testament theme.

When Isaiah receives words to proclaim as God's prophet, the Lord says to him, "Go, and say to this people: 'Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.'"¹³ It will come to pass that all of the twelve, not Judas, will hear but not understand, look but not see.

Though our hearing and vision are not perfect, we believe that by faith we are already the sheep of the Shepherd.

⁵ Mark 6:45–52

⁶ Mark 4:26–29.

⁷ Mark 3:1–6.

⁸ Mark 4:35–41.

⁹ Marcus, 374.

¹⁰ Mark 6:3.

¹¹ See Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), 196–214.

¹² Marcus, 379.

¹³ Isaiah 6:9–10.

You may know this poem by Emily Dickinson. I found the first two lines of it in Marcus' commentary. It's poem 623—easy to find online:¹⁴

*It was too late for man,
But early yet for God;
Creation impotent to help,
But prayer remained our side.*

*How excellent the heaven,
When earth cannot be had;
How hospitable, then, the face
Of our old neighbor, God!*

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹⁴ https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/It_was_too_late_for_Man_%E2%80%94, (accessed 8 January 2021).