

✠ Mark 8:1-9 ✠

IN NOMINE IESU

The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sits a multitude down on the grass and feeds them from five loaves of bread and a few small fish.

The things of God never look adequate. They are always too small and too few. The bread was too few and the fish too small. How can they feed so many? The water of Holy Baptism is too common. How can water do such a great thing as to work the forgiveness of sins, rescue you from death and the devil, and give eternal salvation? The bread and wine are too earthy. How can they deliver the risen life of Jesus? How can mere words affect salvation? Surely there is something more, that these things are not all there is. Surely the kingdom of God commands a greater army than bread and water, words and wine.

The Church has always been plagued by those who think this way, those who say there must be more. These people think Christianity is about great faith and mighty works of holy living rather than about confessing that Jesus is Lord and preaching forgiveness in His Name. They praise action more than the confession of the heart spoken through the lips. To them it doesn't matter if Billy Graham preaches false doctrine that all religions lead to God, they still think him a great Christian because of all the seemingly great things he has done. They think Rick Warren is a marvelous Christian because he has a successful book business, even though his preaching is about the Christian and never about the Christ. There is a name for these people. They are Enthusiasts. And they always long for something greater than what is given.

They will not sit on the grass and quietly eat what the Lord gives to him, but will jump up and run about frantically screaming that there must be something more. There must be requirements, obstacles to overcome, lessons to memorize, books to study, habits to form, money to give. There must be more knowledge, better understanding, and harder discipline. And when they can find nothing, for the kingdom of heaven is not made of such things, they invent things. They make up rules whereby they judge a person a good or a bad Christian. They say that you must sit like this and eat with only this hand and eat the bread before you eat the fish. For them it is not enough that someone faithfully attends the words of Jesus, preaching and the Sacrament, they demand more. Meanwhile our Lord is simply giving out bread and fish to all who desire it, regardless of how they are dressed, who their parents were, how much they tithe, or whether or not they have the right background.

Woe to those who put burdens on the people so that they cannot bear the load but are crushed under the weight; who do not lift a finger to help those they crush. Woe to those who drive people from God saying that God demands more than listening to His Son. These people love to be complimented on their faith and so they always give examples from their lives about how great their faith is and how much they trust God so that those who are suffering pangs of conscience are driven to despair thinking they must have such great confidence if they are to be considered a Christian. They love to be seen by all, yet they will not help those who are troubled in their consciences by telling them they are forgiven, that Jesus is their righteousness and salvation. Instead they ask how often and sincere are their prayers? They ask what they've done to cause such hardships to happen, for surely only the wicked are chastised by God. They say that if you truly believed you wouldn't have such doubt and affliction. But they do not realize that those who are with Jesus have not eaten for three days. That is, those who follow Jesus are hungry and poor. They are meek and lowly. They do not always look happy. It is interesting that the Bible never depicts Jesus as smiling. He weeps, He

is tired, He is hungry, He is lonely, but He is never smiling and happy. Even at the Wedding in Cana John does not write of Jesus being merry and smiling. Instead he writes of the burden of being the elect of God. Better to be poor in spirit and confess your sins with a weak and feeble faith than to be rich and try to buy your way into the kingdom of heaven with your faith or works.

Now someone may say, "But Pastor, doesn't the Church require that the catechumens memorize the catechism and parts of Scripture? Doesn't she require people to attend preaching and the Sacrament if they are to be considered a part of this congregation? Aren't these burdens that laid upon the people's heads?" No; for the yoke of our Lord is gentle and His burden is light.

The Church expects what our Lord expects, that people live out their faith, presenting your members as slaves of righteousness leading to sanctification. That is, if you say you believe the Bible, that Jesus is your Savior from sin and death, then your life will show this. That is, you will gladly attend preaching and the sacraments. And memorizing the faith and attending preaching and the sacraments will be a joy to you; raising your children with our Lord's Prayer on their lips will be a blessing to you rather than a burden on you. Now perhaps this group doesn't need to hear this, after all, you're here. But now you have something to say to those who would say to you that you don't need to hear preaching or attend the Sacrament to be considered a Christian. How can anyone desire to be called a Christian when they despise the things of Christ?

If someone wants the kingdom of heaven without the things that belong to it, then the Church cannot oblige them. The Church is not free to abuse what has been entrusted to her. She cannot absolve where there is no contrition and repentance. Those who want Christianity to be a matter of the heart only, and not of the lips and life, will fight her and say that she lays an unnecessary and difficult burden on the people, that she demands works to be saved. But in truth she is doing what Jesus does: she gives out wedding clothes to all who ask, but then expects them to put the wedding clothes on and attend the wedding.

We should not confuse the Church expecting someone to gladly hear and learn God's Word by attending preaching and the sacraments, and by train their children in the fear and instruction of the Lord, with someone demanding church attendance or anything else for salvation. Jesus won salvation for all men on the cross, and rose for mankind's justification. Salvation is for everyone, male and female, young and old. If this is believed, then the life lived will reflect it. If the life lived does not reflect this, that you are forgiven and have peace with God, then don't expect the Church to consider you a Christian. Better to be able to say the Creed than to quote of all of Scripture and never say, "I believe."

It is the enthusiast that continues to ask of the child who can recite the creed, "Yes, but does he really believe?" because the enthusiast, in the end, thinks salvation is earned by faith, which is proved by works. And that is why they always demand something more, because if salvation is earned by faith then they need to prove to themselves, to God, and to everyone that they have it. And simply hearing God's Word and eating and drinking bread and wine cannot possibly be evidence enough. But faith is not a work that earns salvation. Faith is a gift from God. Faith in God is salvation and it is given in Jesus' Name, by God, through His Spirit. And those who believe say, "I believe" and sit and eat what is given to them, asking for nothing more and desiring nothing less, are those who believe.

Had there been those among the 4,000 that day when our Lord multiplied the bread and fish who stood up and walked away saying that this was too easy or that they didn't need Jesus' bread to strengthen them, they would not have been considered part of the multitude. So it is

with the Church. Those who want nothing to do with her are not to be considered as belonging to her. Disregarding the things of God as unimportant and frivolous, not to mention pathetic, is the same as hating and despising them.

So again, the kingdom of heaven is like a man who sits the multitude on the ground and feeds them from five loaves of bread and a few small fish. There is nothing more. There is nothing more than the Word. And this Word is joined to bread and wine, water and preaching. It is the Word that makes these things of God, makes them holy and necessary for salvation. For wherever the Word of God is, wherever Jesus is, that is where salvation and heaven are.

Those 4,000 or so men, women, and children, whether they knew it or not, whether they believed it or not, ate in the presence of the kingdom of heaven. There they sat, chewing bread they did not toil for, eating fish they did not catch, so that their bellies were full and their strength was renewed. They had not even asked Jesus for this. They did not say, "Rabbi, please feed us." For not even Jesus' own disciples imagined that this Man would have been able to do so. Yet here it is, a multitude eating the miracle. Just as the Church, the multitude of saints, eats and drinks the miracle of salvation and life in His body and blood, given and shed for you.

It is the Lord who invites you to sit in His presence and who takes the bread, gives thanks, breaks it and gives it to you, free of cost, free of strings attached. Those who follow our Lord may look hungry and under fed, poor and tired, but Jesus sustains those He instructs. He feeds those who follow after Him. He enlivens those who desire His words.

Come, sit and eat, and taste and see that the Lord is good.

In the name of the FATHER and of the ✠ SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT.

✠ AMEN ✠