

16TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
July 22ND 2012

DESERT AND CROWD

I think this Sunday's gospel passage is given to us, to get us ready for the next month. Over the next month, we let go the gospel of Mark, and turn to that of John, indeed just to his 6th chapter. This happens every year of Mark (year C). Mark is shorter than Matthew and Luke, and there's time in the year of Mark for a small look at John. We will be reflecting on John's development of the Messianic Picnic, and so today we read about that same outstanding event as Mark tells us about it.

At this time of every liturgical year (and perhaps especially this one) we come across **events** in the public life of Jesus that make us stop and think. They are the Messianic picnic (when he fed the thousands), the sea-crossing of the disciples afterwards, Jesus' walk on the water to rejoin them, Jesus' discussion about doctrine with his disciples, Jesus' trip to Tyre and his meeting with the Canaanite woman, Jesus' trip north to Caesarea Philippi and his reception of Peter's confession. Some of these events will come up for special consideration in the weeks to come. They are in Mk (and Mt and Lk) and in Jn.

I am beginning to realize that they form a **sequence**, not just in a literary sense, but probably also in some kind of historical one. They indicate Jesus going public in the strongest way yet in his life, and then they – paradoxically – indicate the way he refused to accept the accolades of the crowds after it all, and deliberately '**disappeared**' from public life itself after they had all happened. I don't propose that he disappeared into one private place. He was just in unlikely places, and not exactly locatable in any of them. He was in Tyre and Sidon, to the west, Caesarea Philippi to the north, etc...perhaps also in Gadara (or Gerasa). But he was not around Galilee (much) after this turning point in his life.

What was he refusing to do, or be? What was he doing? In one word, he was disappearing...

Over the past Sundays, as we look back, **a lot of the support systems around Jesus have been falling away**. I mean family, I mean John the Baptist, etc. I think too that a lot of the mental constructs (from the piety of Israel) have been let go, too, I mean the thought that he is the new Moses, that he is re-enacting the Exodus, that he is completing the return from Exile, etc. I think he is no longer doing the public things that people connected with him. I mean healings, I mean preaching, etc. I think he has been edging step by step into solitary, by his own choice, and by circumstance.

Doesn't this 'disappearing' seem to be against who he was and what he was about? Actually, no. Perhaps, parabolically, no.

I have said, since we began reflecting on Mark, that **from his baptism, Jesus is Son of God. Because of that, he has become son of man – the icon of human weakness, because no humanity can sustain being the Son of God. This means that he has to live humanly in ways that more ambitious people think is less than what human ought to be. It is less ostentatious. It is humbler. It avoids**

theatricals. It prefers the simple. In short, it is a kind of disappearing from seeming adequacy into, well, into, divine filiation. The further you go into it, the more you disappear from other humans with their different way of being human. I think, the older Jesus got, the more he wanted to disappear. Circumstances, political and otherwise, made it in some ways inevitable, but even without them, there was something inside him that made him do it. Not that he liked it. He had to, to be who he was – the weakened and emptied out human being who was more and more like that because he was totally filled with God to the point of being God’s Son. It’s not a program he sets up. It’s not some kind of Carthusian rule he imposes on himself. It is just, simply, that he does it. He ends up doing the most elementary things in the most basic way. Of course, people never understand. Of course, he ends up being the loser in the human exchanges. Of course it makes it easier for those against him to get rid of him. [How do you get rid of someone who has disappeared anyway?]

There is always a paradoxical interest in such a person. Call it curiosity. If you are known to be like that, people will come and have a look at you. I think that explains today’s gospel. He goes to the desert to be alone (yes, of course, he would do that). People find out (they would, wouldn’t they?). The crowds come. He has pity on them. He feeds them... they never let him have the solitude he wanted....so what? He disappears even from that need inside himself...

I am struck by the one-liners in the gospel story:

He saw a large crowd.
He took pity on them.
We have....nothing (to eat).
There is no need for them to go.
You give them something to eat.
Bring them here to me.
He distributed what they had to everyone.
They ate as much as they wanted.
They gathered the crumbs.
Pick up the pieces so that nothing gets wasted
They were about to come and take him by force and make him king.
He escaped back to the hills by himself.

He took pity. He had compassion. The man with no-policy and no-resources is still a man with heart. Basic instincts take over. ‘I might be in need of solitude, but these people are here and they are hungry’. No one has any food – the crowds, the disciples, Jesus. We have....nothing... Send them to the villages. No, no need for that. You feed them. Hang on, all we have is a few loaves and fishes. Give them to me. Share them with them. And they all had more than they needed or wanted. There were left-overs. They gathered the left-overs. Nothing is wasted. No one is left out.

He doesn’t teach them. He doesn’t heal them. He doesn’t take the hunger away. He just feeds them. Once.

Practical help for the needy was a higher priority than working out what was wrong with Messianism, or discerning where his life would go now. It was a more immediate reality than heading for nowhere to work out personal agenda.

=====