



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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The Sunday Next Before Advent, November 20th, 2011

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

Fantasy currently dominates the entertainment business. Wizards, elves, goblins, hobbits, orcs, vampires, werewolves, avatars and zombies not only dominate our TV screens and bookshelves, they populate Hollywood's most popular movies. Thus it is a bit jarring to learn that today's Gospel reading stands, among other things, as an awful warning about the dangers inherent in fantasy and fantasizing.

Most of you probably find it a bit odd to think that St. John's account of Jesus' miraculous feeding of the five thousand serves as a stern warning against letting your imaginations run riot. But the reason Jesus needed to feed all those people was that not only his disciples, but the members of the crowd, themselves, were so preoccupied by visions of the glory they imagined lay in the future they didn't spare a thought for their needs of the day.

They are, of course, by no means unique in this. It is a fundamental human trait found in all cultures, in all ages. Folks get so wrapped up in what they imagine will be coming down the pike, they don't have time to pay heed to what's going on in the here and now. We are so consumed with plotting and planning for the coming six months, or a year or even a decade hence, we don't give ourselves time to live in – and enjoy – the present.

Jesus' followers failed to make the most basic arrangements for a long hike in the country because they were so preoccupied with what they fondly imagined were Jesus' plans for the

future, they were blinded them to what he was actually doing in the here and now.

Though he never so much as hinted he was preparing to launch a military uprising against the Romans occupiers, his disciples' imaginations led them to interpret his every move as directed towards this end. This, in turn, led them to fantasize about their own heroic roles in this great revolutionary enterprise rather than tackle the unglamorous practical tasks associated with an evangelical preaching tour.

It doesn't seem to have occurred to either the disciples or Jesus' thousands of fans that they had set off on a long hike to a wild and woolly locations, miles and miles from civilization without having made the slightest preparation for the journey. It didn't dawn on them that they were stranded without food until Jesus asked Philip the rhetorical question: "Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?"

Philip's stammering reply was simply an effort to shuffle off responsibility: "Six months pay wouldn't buy enough to give each of them a mouthful." In other words: "We didn't do anything because we don't have the money." Philip's lame excuse simply doesn't wash. The disciples should not only have brought their own rations, they should have warned the crowd to bring food if they planned to tag along.

The disciples' failure doesn't absolve the folks in crowd of blame. They shouldn't have needed prompting to provide for themselves and their

families before setting off in pursuit of the messiah. But everyone – disciples and hangers on – were so preoccupied with their fantasies about the future, they failed to take care of their responsibilities in the here and now.

As a consequence, some 5,000 men – plus women and children – were stuck in the middle of nowhere with nothing to eat and no hope of obtaining it. The situation was desperate and "sorry" wouldn't fix it. The sad fact of the matter is that if Jesus had been relying on Philip and his colleagues, his career as messiah would have been over. A campaign rally that concluded with 5,000-plus people suffering from malnourishment and heat stroke would have been as big a public relations disaster back then as it would be today.

Yet another surprising aspect to the whole affair is that the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand seems to have taken Philip and his fellow apostles completely by surprise. Surely they must have been well aware of Jesus' miraculous powers. They must have known he was capable of astounding acts of creation. They had spent more than a year as his constant companions – watching everything he did and listening to every word he said.

They had heard him preach and teach. They had witnessed him raise the dead and perform countless miracles of healing. He had even bestowed his healing powers on them and sent them out on missionary journeys curing the sick and proclaiming his gospel. Yet when it came to the crunch, it came as a complete shock to see him feed these 5,000 hungry people.

The truth of the matter is that the disciples didn't seem to think that the crowd's hunger was especially important. The disciples, you see, regarded Jesus' miracles as a sideshow, a prelude to the main act: the revolution. To them, Jesus' preaching tours were primarily aimed at drumming up support for his political program. As far as they were concerned, he was on a sort of presidential campaign, and they heartily wished it were over so they could get on with the main event.

It is a common human failing to mistake our own agendas for God's agenda. This is why it is always worth viewing politicians who claim to

be doing God's work with a certain skepticism. There is always a good chance that fantasy is at work. But our taste for fantasy doesn't simply endanger us in our religious lives and in the public square. It is a real and present danger to our private and personal happiness.

Fantasy is the reason the grass always looks greener on the other side of the street. It is the destroyer of families. It persuades spouses that that life could be warmer, richer, more romantic with somebody else. It convinces children their parents are trying to thwart their ambitions and undermine their happiness. It is the destroyer of contentment – seducing us into setting unreasonable goals for ourselves and for others. More prosaically, it deflects our attention from the job at hand – the work that we should be doing for the good of our pocket books and our souls.

This is why fantasy is one of Satan's favorite tools. We think of it as a beguiling pastime but it is a door the devil walks through. It delights him because we tend to see it as a harmless indulgence. We picture it as pleasurable, but in fact it inflicts on us far more pain than pleasure. We overlook the fact that worry is a much a product of fantasy as romantic daydreams.

Worry serves just as much to deflect us from doing our duty to God as giddy ambition. Both prevent us from truly enjoying ourselves because they detract us from present reality – the only time we actually have to enjoy – and focus us on an imaginary future. Fantasy encourages us to wish our lives away.

This is why Jesus warns us so strongly against it: "Seek first [God's] Kingdom and his righteousness, and all things shall be added unto you. Be not therefore anxious for the morrow: for the morrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

The good news about the feeding the five thousand is that we don't need to worry about Jesus. He doesn't need our help. We simply need to keep focused on reality. The miracle is our guarantee that when things seem hopeless, he will take care of us. It's our assurance that he knows our needs better than we do. And that reality should be more comforting than the most exotic or romantic of fantasies. *AMEN.*