



Homily for the 6th Sunday after Pentecost

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Very Rev. J. David Carter, JCL, JV

We are now progressing through the Sundays after Pentecost, and the Gospels are unfolding for us the mystery of God's providence in the gift of the Spirit that was bestowed on the Church at Pentecost.

In the Gospel for this Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, we hear about a second miracle of the multiplication of the loaves of bread and the fish. If you recall, the first miracle of multiplication fed five thousand with five loaves and two fish, with twelve baskets full left over. Now we hear of four-thousand fed with seven loaves and a few fish, and seven baskets full left over. One thing that this second account clearly refutes is any interpretation that somehow the multiplication is not a miracle but just an activation of the the people's capacity to share. This modern misinterpretation is part of a pernicious error that wants to undercut the miraculous and make religion just about the human capacity to get along with one another. But very clearly in this second account, as if to emphasize the truth of the matter, we hear that they have been there for three days and there is nothing left to eat. In fact, there was a real concern that the people would not have the strength to get home on account of the lack of food. So clearly, these accounts of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes are not about human generosity and sharing. Rather they are true miracles that reveal the sheer generosity of God — how God has the capacity to take the little that we have and make it more than enough.

St. Maximus the Confessor wrote a sermon on this passage proposing an even deeper and mystical explanation of both these miracles.

St. Maximus reads the Gospel not just as history, but as a revelation of the divine economy — how God feeds not only bodies, but souls. He notices something curious: in one miracle, five thousand are fed with five loaves; in another, four thousand with seven. This is not simply a detail — it is a key to understanding how God relates to us.

He sees the five thousand as representing the Gospel being preached to the people of Israel, nourished as they are by the five books of Moses — the Law - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The five loaves, then, are the words of the Law, and the two fishes symbolize the prophets and John the Baptist, preparing the way for Christ. Jesus then takes these words which have prepared them but have not been enough, and multiplies it into a rich banquet capable of satisfying both soul and body. This rich banquet bears the fruits of the spirit, which are twelve-fold like the twelve baskets left over.

In the feeding of the four thousand, Maximus sees something more universal - the mission to the Gentiles, to all the nations. Four is the number of the earth — four directions, four winds - North, South, East and West. The four thousand stand then for all nations of the earth. Jesus is solicitous that all have a share in the food that He gives. The seven loaves are the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit, poured out upon all flesh at Pentecost. This is the birthday of the Church, which is the new Jerusalem, the new Temple. This is represented by the seven baskets left over who are the seven churches from the Book of Revelation with their lampstands lit and burn brightly and who shed abundant light for all to see.

And here is where we enter the story.

Each of us, in our daily lives, is hungry, like the crowds of people who were gathered to see Jesus — hungry not just for food, but for meaning, for hope, for love that does not fade. So often, we try to satisfy this hunger by ourselves without God, and we fail. We try to fill ourselves with the bread of the world: success, entertainment, fleeting pleasures. But these leave us empty, and it is not enough. After three days, we are starving for something more.



Jesus offers us a different food. This is the bread of life. In the feeding of the five thousand, He teaches us to sit down on the “grass.” For Maximus, this means to lay aside our striving in the flesh. In the feeding of the four thousand, he teaches us to sit down on the ground, which for Maximus means to set aside earthly things. In both, the people do this to prepare to be filled with the Bread of Life, which is His body, the Word of God made flesh, broken and shared with us.

But this is not a passive feeding. To be fed by grace is to be transformed. The twelve baskets, says Maximus, are the fullness of the Church, which includes both the twelve tribes of Israel fulfilled in the apostolic Church founded upon the twelve apostles. The seven baskets are the “seven Churches,” the “seven golden candlesticks,” mentioned in the Book of Revelations who are filled with the Holy Spirit. This is not just about a meal; it's about a mission. We are fed so that we may feed others. We are filled with the Spirit — wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord — so that we may go into the world bearing witness to a love that is not of this world.

So, what does this mean for us? It means that every time we approach the altar, every time we receive the Eucharist, we are taking part in that same mystery — not just receiving something, but being changed. It is meant to break open our self-enclosed hearts and pour us out in love for others.

It means that even in our daily struggles — at work, at home, in moments of doubt or dryness — the same Spirit that filled those seven baskets is offered to us. We are not left alone to feed ourselves or faint from hunger along the journey. Christ himself provides, if only we bring to him what little we have — our loaves and fishes, — and trust him to multiply it.

So let us, as St. Maximus urges, bring our hunger to Christ, and let him turn it into a feast of abundance — not just for us, but for the whole world. As we receive that grace, we also become bread broken for others, witnesses to a mystery that still feeds the multitudes today: the mystery of love poured out in Christ Jesus.