

**Bible Study** based on Mt 14:13-21 given by Dr. Klara Tarr Cselovszky on September 25th, 2015, during the *Kaiserswerther General Conference* in Gallneukirchen

*Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children. (NRSV)*

Jesus withdrew ....this is how our passage begins. He takes a boat to a quiet place, by himself. According to Matthew, Herod and the threat he poses is the reason for this development. Jesus just learned that John the Baptist has been murdered. Is Jesus withdrawing out of fear? The continuation of the story suggests otherwise. The reason for this lonely boat ride lies elsewhere. Before Jesus responds to the challenges of violence, misery and need, he first seeks silence. In a lonely area, in the desert. The desert is often an image for encounter with God and a place of closeness with God.

And the people followed him ... The crowd seeking healing in the presence of the Lord joins Jesus in the desert. I see a message in this moment in the story that is also relevant for us. The message: before responding to the impulses coming to us from the world, we should first seek to hear God's voice in the silence. This is the only way. Only this way can we avoid having our reactions be born out of human rage, vengeance, fear, ambition, powerlessness or prejudice. These do not bring about healing. Healing or wholeness arises out of compassionate love which one can experience in silent communion with God.

*Compassion* ... It seems as though the disciples have learned something in the presence of their master after all. The evangelist Matthew reports that the twelve have noticed that the people around them are in a difficult situation. They are hungry – and evening is near. But the disciples do not just notice the need in their immediate environment – they do something to ease the problem. I think that such awareness and willingness to help have always been part of discipleship.

*Hungry people* ... we also have many of them today. Some have an empty refrigerator, others an empty wallet and some have neither refrigerator nor wallet. There are people who need help like the refugees who have left all their possessions behind and begun their journey. They are crossing the borders of our countries to find a new and safe home.

But there are even more people whose presence we may not notice and whose hunger cannot be stilled with food because what they lack in their lives is of a different nature. Yet, the description is also apt for them: they are „hungry people“ ... we should take them seriously as well. People who are afraid of the future, who have lost their trust in the future. People who have become insecure and feel threatened, especially by those who are on the journey through Europe. People who have questions but do not receive real, honest answers to their disconcerting questions.

The twelve know: the most important step in solving the problem is to involve Jesus in what is happening. They go to him and tell him what they have noticed. The area is arid, night is falling, and the people are hungry. This makes me think of the border guards in Europe where thousands of people are waiting for a better life.

Jesus' answer offers a surprise: „You give them something to eat!“ These encouraging words speak not only to the disciples who were present then. Jesus' command articulates a task for disciples of all times.

Give something to eat to those who are hungry. Offer help to those who are in physical or spiritual distress. In order to give this sentence a broader sense we could also say: Carry those in your heart who are in need!

Those who lack a home – or health, community, care giving. Those who need values like safety and orientation. Those who lack the power to free their lives from the prison of addictions and passions.

*Give them something to eat.* The confidence Jesus has in us is a high calling but it also paralyzes us at least as much as it honors us. The disciples quickly find themselves confronted by their finite abilities and possibilities and the realization of how insignificant their powers and means are in regards to resolving and healing such great needs. Yes, the disciples are confronted with the unpleasant fact:

*“We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish” - yes, what we have is not enough to alleviate such need.* We can hear the same attitude in the answer we Christians may give today: *What can we possibly give?* When the hunger among and around us is great? When so much need burdens the lives of many? How could we ever give and do enough? What should lend strength to our human words and deeds so that faith, endurance, conversion, power, calmness, and comfort could grow out of them? How can solutions be found that neither look for scapegoats nor strengthen the divide? What seems unimaginable today shall be given to us by Jesus.

It is great that our story from the Gospel not only shows disciples who are diaconically sensitive and aware but also limited in their possibilities. We do not only hear about the

hungry and needy human throng because the miracle occurs thank to Jesus' presence and blessing.

*„And all ate and were filled“* ... but the miracle which took place in this arid region keeps on repeating itself among us today. The little that the disciples were able to give proved itself to be plenty with Jesus' blessing. The five loaves and two fish turned out to be plentiful enough with Jesus' blessing to satisfy the hunger of five thousand people. We can be witnesses of the same miracle today when God's word crosses human lips and when weak people offer a small testament of their faith in word and deed. I cannot resist telling you about the example of our new diaconal institution for people with disabilities in Budapest, Sarepta, which we inaugurated with a blessing and with the help of the Kaiserswerther Verband in Germany last Sunday because the word given to us disciples can ease the pain of suffering today in wonderful ways. It becomes food for souls – with Jesus' blessing.

It is important that we do not only use our human means – prosperity, knowledge, benevolence – to ease the need, that we do not only measure the situation with human measurements, but that we also dare to invest the treasures we have received from Jesus' hands. Jesus gave them so that we may pass them on and do our work because no one will do it for us, the present day disciples.

May the blessings of the Lord be with us so that our service – like with the five thousand – may be accompanied by new miracles.