

Matthew: 14:15–21

From Catena Aurea:

15. And when it was evening, his disciples came to him, saying, This is a desert place, and the time is now past; send the multitude away, that they may go into the villages, and buy themselves victuals.

16. But Jesus said unto them, They need not depart; give ye them to eat.

17. And they say unto him, We have here but five loaves, and two fishes.

18. He said, Bring them hither to me.

19. And he commanded the multitude to sit down on the grass, and took the five loaves, and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven, he blessed, and brake, and gave the loaves to his disciples, and the disciples to the multitude.

20. And they did all eat, and were filled: and they took up of the fragments that remained twelve baskets full.

21. And they that had eaten were about five thousand men, beside women and children.

CHRYSOSTOM. It is a proof of the faith of these multitudes that they endured hunger in waiting for the Lord even till evening; to which purpose it follows, And when it was evening, his disciples came unto him, saying, This is a desert place, and the time is now past. The Lord purposing to feed them waits to be asked, as always not stepping forward first to do miracles, but when called upon. None out of the crowd approached Him, both because they stood in great awe of Him, and because in their zeal of love they did not feel their hunger. But even the disciples do not come and say, Give them to eat; for the disciples were as yet in an imperfect condition; but they say, This is a desert place. So that what was proverbial among the Jews to express a miracle, as it is said, Can he spread a table in the wilderness? (Ps. 78:19.) this also He shews among his other works. For this cause also He leads them out into the desert, that the miracle might be clear of all suspicion, and that none might suppose that any thing was supplied towards the feast from any neighbouring town. But though the place be desert, yet is He there who feeds the world; and though the hour is, as they say, past, yet He who now commanded was not subjected to hours. And though the Lord had gone before His disciples in healing many sick, yet they were so imperfect that they could

not judge what He would do concerning food for them, wherefore they add, Send the multitude away, that they may go into the towns, and buy themselves food. Observe the wisdom of the Master; He says not straightway to them, 'I will give them to eat;' for they would not easily have received this, but, Jesus said unto them, They need not depart, Give ye them to eat.

JEROME. Wherein He calls the Apostles to breaking of bread, that the greatness of the miracle might be more evident by their testimony that they had none.

AUGUSTINE. (De Cons. Ev. ii. 46.) It may perplex some how, if the Lord, according to the relation of John, asked Philip whence bread was to be found for them, that can be true which Matthew here relates, that the disciples first prayed the Lord to send the multitudes away, that they might buy food from the nearest towns. Suppose then that after these words the Lord looked upon the multitude and said what John relates, but Matthew and the others have omitted. And by such cases as this none ought to be perplexed, when one of the Evangelists relates what the rest have omitted.

CHRYSOSTOM. Yet not even by these words were the disciples set right, but speak yet to Him as to man; They answered unto Him, We have here but five loaves and two fishes. From this we learn the philosophy of the disciples, how far they despised food; they were twelve in number, yet they had but five loaves and two fishes; for things of the body were contemned by them, they were altogether possessed by spiritual things. But because the disciples were yet attracted to earth, the Lord begins to introduce the things that were of Himself; He saith unto them, Bring them hither to me. Wherefore does He not create out of nothing the bread to feed the multitude with? That He might put to silence the mouth of Marcion and Manichæus, who take away from God His creatures, (i. e. deny that God created the visible world.) and by His deeds might teach that all things that are seen are His works and creation, and that it is He that has given us the fruits of the earth, who said in the beginning, Let the earth bring forth the green herb; (Gen. 1:11.) for this is no less a deed than that. For of five loaves to make so many loaves, and fishes in like manner, is no less a thing than to bring fruits from the earth, reptiles and other living things from the waters; which shewed Him to be Lord both of land and sea. By the example of the disciples also we ought to be taught, that though we should have but little, we ought to give that to such as have need. For they when bid to bring their five loaves say not, Whence shall we satisfy our own hunger? but immediately obey; And He commanded the multitude to sit down on the grass, and took the five loaves and the two fishes, and looking up to heaven blessed them, and brake. Why did He look to heaven and bless? For it should be believed concerning Him that He is from the Father, and that He is equal with the Father. His equality He shews when He does all things with power. That He is from the Father He shews by referring

to Him whatsoever He does, and calling upon Him on all occasions. To prove these two things therefore, He works His miracles at times with power, at other times with prayer. It should be considered also that in lesser things He looks to heaven, but in greater He does all with power. When He forgave sins, raised the dead, stilled the sea, opened the secrets of the heart, opened the eyes of him that was born blind, which were works only of God, He is not seen to pray; but when He multiplies the loaves, a work less than any of these, He looks up to heaven, that you may learn that even in little things He has no power but from His Father. And at the same time He teaches us not to touch our food, until we have returned thanks to Him who gives it us. For this reason also He looks up to heaven, because His disciples had examples of many other miracles, but none of this.

JEROME. While the Lord breaks there is a sowing of food; for had the loaves been whole and not broken into fragments, and thus divided into a manifold harvest, they could not have fed so great a multitude. The multitude receives the food from the Lord through the Apostles; as it follows, And he gave the loaves to his disciples, and the disciples to the multitude.

CHRYSOSTOM. In doing which He not only honoured them, but would that upon this miracle they should not be unbelieving, nor forget it when it was past, seeing their own hands had borne witness to it. Therefore also He suffers the multitudes first to feel the sense of hunger, and His disciples to come to Him, and to ask Him, and He took the loaves at their hands, that they might have many testimonies of that that was done, and many things to remind them of the miracle. From this that He gave them, nothing more than bread and fish, and that He set this equally before all, He taught them moderation, frugality, and that charity by which they should have all things in common. This He also taught them in the place, in making them sit down upon the grass; for He sought not to feed the body only, but to instruct the mind. But the bread and fish multiplied in the disciples' hands; whence it follows, And they did all eat, and were filled. But the miracle ended not here; for He caused to abound not only whole loaves, but fragments also; to shew that the first loaves were not so much as what was left, and that they who were not present might learn what had been done, and that none might think that what had been done was a phantasy; And they took up fragments that were left, twelve baskets full.

JEROME. Each of the Apostles fills his basket of the fragments left by his Saviour, that these fragments might witness that they were true loaves that were multiplied.

CHRYSOSTOM. For this reason also He caused twelve baskets to remain over and above, that Judas might bear his basket. He took up the fragments, and gave them to the disciples and not to the multitudes, who were yet more imperfectly trained than the disciples.

JEROME. To the number of loaves, five, the number of the men that ate is apportioned, five thousand; And the number of them that had eaten was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

CHRYSOSTOM. This was to the very great credit of the people, that the women and the men stood up when these remnants still remained.

HILARY. The five loaves are not multiplied into more, but fragments succeed to fragments; the substance growing whether upon the tables, or in the hands that took them up, I know not.

JEROME. But all these things are full of mysteries; the Lord does these things not in the morning, nor at noon, but in the evening, when the Sun of righteousness was set.

HILARY. But the Lord answered, They have no need to go, shewing that those whom He heals have no need of the food of mercenary doctrine, and have no necessity to return to Judæa to buy food; and He commands the Apostles that they give them food. Did He not know then that there was nothing to give them? But there was a complete series of types to be set forth; for as yet it was not given the Apostles to make and minister the heavenly bread, the food of eternal life; and their answer thus belongs to the chain of spiritual interpretation; they were as yet confined to the five loaves, that is, the five books of the Law, and the two fishes, that is, the preaching of the Prophets and of John.

HILARY. These therefore the Apostles first set forth, because they were yet in these things; and from these things the preaching of the Gospel grows to its more abundant strength and virtue. Then the people is commanded to sit down upon the grass, as no longer lying upon the ground, but resting upon the Law, each one reposing upon the fruit of his own works as upon the grass of the earth.

JEROME. Or, they are bid to lie down on the grass, and that, according to another Evangelist, by fifties and by hundreds, that after they have trampled upon their flesh, and have subjugated the pleasures of the world as dried grass under them, then by the presencea of the number fifty, they ascend to the eminent perfection of a hundred. He looks up to heaven to teach us that our eyes are to be directed thither. The Law with the Prophets is broken, and in the midst of them are brought forward mysteries., that whereas they partook not of it whole, when broken into pieces it may be food for the multitude of the Gentiles.

HILARY. Then the loaves are given to the Apostles, because through them the gifts of divine grace were to be rendered. And the number of them that did eat is found to be the same as that of those who should believe; for we find in the book of Acts that out of the vast number of the people of Israel, five thousand men believed.

JEROME. There partook five thousand who had reached maturity; for women and children, the weaker sex, and the tender age, were unworthy of number; thus in the book of Numbers, slaves, women, children, and an undistinguished crowd, are passed over unnumbered.

From Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture:

14:15–16 You Give Them Something to Eat

You Give Them.

Chrysostom: Note carefully the Teacher's skill. Observe with what discretion he draws them toward believing. Observe how deliberately this unfolds. For he did not simply say, "I will feed them." The deeper significance of that would have not been easily understood. So what does he say? "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

He did not say "I give them" but "you give them." For at this point their regard for him was essentially as to a man. They said to him, "We have only five loaves here and two fish." At this point Mark adds, "They did not understand the saying, for their heart was hardened." For they were continuing to crawl like babies. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 49.

Send Them Away?

Cyril of Alexandria: Let us examine carefully what this sending away of the crowds is all about. Some of those who followed Christ were afflicted by evil spirits and begged to be delivered from them. Others were afflicted with various sicknesses from which they sought relief. Therefore, because the disciples knew that Jesus had only to consider what those who were suffering longed for and it would be accomplished, "they sent them away." They did this not so much because they thought Jesus' time was

too valuable but because they had a love for the crowds and, as though already having an understanding of pastoral care, they began to care for the people. Fragment 175.

14:17 Five Loaves and Two Fish

The Five Loaves of the Five Books of the Law.

Hilary of Poitiers: When the disciples advised that the crowds be sent away into the neighboring villages to buy food, he answered, “They do not need to go away.” This signaled that these people whom he healed with the food of teaching, teaching that was not for sale, had no need to go back to Judea and buy food. He ordered the apostles to give them something to eat.

But was Jesus unaware there was nothing to give? Did he not know the disciples possessed a limited amount of food? He could read their minds, so he knew. We are invited to explain things by reasoning according to types. It was not yet granted to the apostles to make and administer heavenly bread for the food of eternal life. Yet their response reflected an ordered reasoning about types: they had only five loaves and two fish. This means that up to then they depended on five loaves—that is, the five books of the law. And two fish nourished them—that is, the preaching of the prophets and of John. For in the works of the law there was life just as there is life from bread, but the preaching of John and the prophets restored hope to human life by virtue of water. Therefore the apostles offered these things first, because that was the level of their understanding at the time. From these modest beginnings the preaching of the gospel has proceeded from them, from these same apostles, until it has grown into an immense power. On Matthew 14.10.

14:18 Bring Them

Feeding the World in a Deserted Place.

Chrysostom: Finally he said to them, “Bring them here to me.” Although this was a deserted place, he that is here is ready to feed the world. The one who is speaking to you is not subject to time, even though “the day is now over.”

In John's Gospel it is further related that these were loaves of barley. This is not mentioned accidentally but with the object of teaching us to trample under foot the pride of costly living. Such was also the diet of the prophets. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 49.1.

14:19 Blessing and Breaking the Loaves

Evangelical Food.

Hilary of Poitiers: Having taken the bread and the fish, the Lord looked up to heaven, then blessed and broke them. He gave thanks to the Father that, after the time of the law and the prophets, he himself was soon to be changed into evangelical food. After this the people were ordered to sit on the grass but not to lie down. Supported by the law, each one was covered as it were with the fruit of his works as with the grass on the ground. On Matthew 4.11.

He Looked to Heaven.

Jerome: They are ordered to sit down on the grass and, according to another Evangelist, to recline in groups of hundreds and of fifties. In this way from the repentance of the fifty, they ascended toward the perfect summit of one hundred.

He looked up to heaven that he might teach them to keep their eyes focused there. He then took in hand five loaves of bread and two fish; he broke the loaves and gave the food to the disciples. By the breaking of the bread, he makes it into a seedbed of food—for if the bread had been left intact and not pulled apart and broken into pieces, they would have been unable to feed the great crowds of men, women and children. The law with the prophets are therefore pulled apart and broken into pieces. Mysteries are made manifest, so that what did not feed the multitude of people in its original whole and unbroken state now feeds them in its divided state. Commentary on Matthew 2.14.19.

He Broke and Gave the Loaves.

Chrysostom: In this miracle Jesus was teaching them humility, temperance, charity, to be of like mind toward one another and to share all things in common. He did so in his choice of location, by providing nothing more than loaves and fishes, by setting the same food before all and having them share it in common and by affording no one more than another. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 49.3.

14:20 All Were Satisfied, and Food Was Left

They Were Satisfied.

Hilary of Poitiers: The loaves were given to the apostles, for through them the gifts of divine grace were to be administered. The crowds were then fed with the five loaves and two fish, and they were satisfied. The leftover fragments of bread and fish, after the people had their fill, amounted to twelve baskets. Thus, by the word of God coming from the teaching of the law and the prophets, the multitude was satisfied; and an abundance of divine power, reserved for the Gentiles from the ministry of the eternal food, was left over for the twelve apostles. On Matthew 4.11.

Twelve Baskets Full of Broken Pieces.

Chrysostom: And not even here does he hold back on the miracle, but it continues as the loaves become fragments. The broken pieces signify that of those loaves, some remained unreceived. This was in order that those who were absent might also learn what had been done.

For this providential purpose, then, Jesus indeed permitted the crowds to get hungry in order that no one might suppose what took place to be as illusion.

For this purpose he also caused just twelve baskets to remain over: That Judas, too, might bear one. He wanted all the disciples to know his power. He fed their hunger. In Elijah's case something similar also took place. The Gospel of Matthew, Homily 49.3.

The Divine Economy.

Cyril of Alexandria: So that by every means the Lord might be known to be God by nature, he multiplies what is little, and he looks up to heaven as though asking for the blessing from above. Now he does this out of the divine economy, for our sakes. For he himself is the one who fills all things, the true blessing from above and from the Father. But, so that we might learn that when we are in charge of the table and are preparing to break the loaves, we ought to bring them to God with hands upraised and bring down upon them the blessing from above, he became for us the beginning and pattern and way. Fragment 177.

Like Manna.

Cyril of Alexandria: It is possible to see these new miracles concurring with more ancient ones and as being activities of one and the same power. The manna once remained in the wilderness for those of Israel. Now, behold, again in the desert he has provided ungrudgingly for those in want of food, as though bringing it down from heaven. For to multiply what is little and to feed such a multitude as though out of nothing would not be out of keeping with the former miracle. At that time Israel was to partake according to need; they had not received food in order to take it away with them, even though many fragments were left. This is, again, a good symbol for measuring use according to need and of not introducing an acquisitiveness that goes beyond what is needful. Fragment 178.

14:21 Numbering the Multitude

Five Thousand Men.

Hilary of Poitiers: The same number of those eating proved to be the number of those who believed. As noted in the book of Acts, out of the countless people of Israel five thousand men believed. Once the people had been satisfied, when they took up the loaves that had been broken into pieces with the fish, there was enough left over to match the number of believers and apostles to be filled with heavenly grace. Thus both the measure suited the number and the number the measure. Within its bounds the calculation was keyed to the proper effect and depended on the guidance of divine power. On Matthew 4.11.