

## Give them some food yourselves

First of all, episodes like today's reading from St. Luke – before they were confined to their written form and collected into a book we call the Gospel – were originally delivered orally either at an early Christian liturgy or catechetical session. They were told – as a story is *told* or narrated – ideally not just spoken but performed! They were more literary than our everyday prose. They were meant to move you, have an effect, to change you – over time if not all at once. You could say they were meant to be magical. Of course they lose something of their force if they become so habitual as to go through one ear and out the other.

The scholar Paul Ricoeur – among others – describes them as extended metaphors – designed to *re-describe* reality as when we say, “John was a charging bull!” Now we know John wasn't and never could be literally a charging bull. But metaphor can make him one – in a way that is truer than “true”. So there are truths that range far beyond the truth of merely eyewitness observation or the multiplication table.

And so today's Gospel narration (which is an extended metaphor) about the loaves and fishes was meant (in part) to *re-design* the way we look at reality. And how wonderfully up-to-date it is – given all the arithmetic. There must have been someone there among Jesus' disciples who resembled our parishioner Bill Shea. You know Bill. He's the one who, during the homily, wanders surreptitiously around the church interior counting how many people are present – like a census taker.

Surely someone like Bill was a character in today's reading because look at all the numbers that make up today's short text: 5 loaves and 2 fish; 5000 men; groups of 50 each; 12 baskets full of leftovers. All of which leaves it open for us to follow the math: if we start with only 5 loaves we may wind up – after the miracle – with at least 4995 (minus the original 5) and so on with the fish; and 100 groups of 50 people each. And have you noticed? It's all about men! What about the women? It allows a lot more counting to do!

The only reason I raise all this is because how well it applies as a miracle to our mathematically, technically sophisticated times. We have reached the point where everything is reducible to numbers, equations, and algorithms. The universal tool has become the computer; hammers and saws are so primeval. It's math that we believe in; that will nail things down to the nth degree – eliminate all mysteries.

In that context, today's story would have us ponder (among other things) the limited range of calculated existence, leaving us still hungry as in a desert, compared to our experiencing the profundity and expansiveness and nutrition of the Being that Christ's word brings to our table – ever ending in a surplus, enough to fill twelve wicker baskets every time around – if we are conscious of what's happening.

Today's Gospel challenges our society's pursuit of an accuracy that will forever be unattainable – thereby allowing room for grace to grow.