

“What to believe?” Mt 14:13-21

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate 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 on them and healed their sick.

Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” But Jesus said, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” They said to him, “We have only five loaves here and two fish.” And he said, “Bring them here to me.” Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

The feeding the five thousand, or, probably, not five, but rather fifteen or even more, if we take into account all the women and children. What do you think of this event? What we think about this event, in fact, tells a lot about what kind of faith we have. This event is one of the best known miracles performed by Jesus from Nazareth.

But can we believe that this really took place? What do you think? To feed thousands with five loaves of bread and two fish? How can this be? Does it sound possible, or reasonable? For many it doesn't.

These days many in academia and in pulpits too try to explain this event, and other similar events, away. First critique comes from so called experts. They deny that something like that could have ever happen.

Why? Because it doesn't happen today. And whatever we don't see and can't repeat today, simply can't possibly be true. It must be some sort of superstition. And we, modern people shouldn't believe things like that anymore.

Once so called experts have made it clear that to believe such things is foolish, those in the Church, who want to look really smart and modern, begin to adjust their teaching and preaching accordingly.

Then you get to hear ideas that evangelists didn't mean to describe a real event of feeding thousands, this is just a story that is supposed to teach us something useful. Something spiritual, something moral.

For example, that Jesus generosity opened the stingy hearts of the people and they pulled out their own bread and fish and begun to share. And if we follow Jesus' example and are generous, the world will be a better place.

Perhaps you have heard this kind of messages. But what happens with Christians who are exposed to these kinds of ideas? What happens if they don't think it through carefully? Sad things happen; they begin to lose their faith.

For if these Biblical stories are not true, then what is the point of Christianity? Perhaps the same as for all religions, to give us some moral guidelines. And if that is it, then why do we need it at all, we can be moral people without religion.

Let us be rational, and scientific, let's leave these old myths behind! And so many turn their backs to Jesus and the Gospel. The reality is, that these people don't exchange myth to truth, or religion to science, they simply exchange one faith to another.

And this other faith also brings its own 'gospel' message. We could call it 'a gospel of freedom', or 'a gospel of me'. What does it sound like? Something like this. Be free from all the restriction of religion and superstition!

No one is going to tell you what you should or shouldn't do. You can make up your own mind, instead of listening to some old book full of fairy tales. And you don't need a god to be a good person.

You can be free. You can be whatever you want to be. Choose your own path, be in charge, be free! It is about you! Have you heard these voices? They are everywhere in our society.

And this news may sound good and liberating, if you don't think it through. The problem is, that this other gospel, is not a gospel at all. What happens when people exchange the Gospel of Jesus to this gospel of this world?

People hope to be free. Instead, they are left alone, on their own in this harsh and hostile world. Suddenly the most important things in our lives, we need to obtain on our own. What are they?

To mention a few of them. Our identity. Security. Our self-worth. Meaning and purpose of our lives. Joy, hope, etc. Those who turn away from the Gospel of Jesus, need to come up answers to all these questions on their own.

Who are you then? What is your identity? Where do you find it? In your achievements? They may never come. In your relationships? They don't last these days. In your desires? They keep changing. Who are you?

Security about your future, where can you find it? In money? It is getting harder and harder to earn it. In possessions? They don't, in fact, give you safety, instead, you need to worry about their safety. And what if your health fails you?

And where to find your dignity and self-worth? That's a big issue these days. It is not enough to imagine that you have one. And why would you have one if you are simply an accidental product of chance?

Can you find it in your status? How many have it? In your accomplishments? What counts as worthy accomplishments? Can you get there at all? Hope. What do you hope for?

For if you believe this gospel of this world, then your hope can be only in this world. But there is not much of it. The longer we live, the more we lose.

Everything we cherish is taken from us: experiences, opportunities, loved ones... At the end, if not earlier, we lose even our health and finally our life is over. Where can you find a hope that will fill your life?

We could continue this list showing how this gospel of the world is not good news at all. Sure, people can still live believing strange things and find some meaning and joy, and many do, but let's compare this worldly gospel with the true Gospel of Jesus.

Today's Gospel event of feeding the thousands gives us such opportunity. In this event we can see at least a glimpse of who Jesus is, and what He is like. He was rejected and ridiculed in His own home town.

He was threatened by authorities of the country. He wanted to be alone, to have some time in prayer. But it didn't happen. The crowds of these needy people followed Him.

If someone ruined your holidays by whining about their problems, what would your response be? Jesus' response was compassion. He loves us, His little, rebellious and always needy creatures. He never turns away anyone.

He attended to their needs, healing them and making them well. Giving to everyone exactly what they needed. At the end, even feeding them. He is never too busy if we call upon Him. He is always compassionate to care for us in all our needs, of body and soul. This is how this event reveals to us Jesus.

But we can also say, that this event is not such a big deal. To feed a few thousands... so what? Who is this Jesus? He is the one about whom the Psalm says:

"The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing. The LORD is near to all who call on him. He fulfills the desire of those who fear him."

Jesus is the same one who opens the hand and satisfies desires of every living thing. Of every living thing! What is a few thousand! He is the Lord of entire creation. Gracious, generous, abundant in His love and care for us.

Why would we wonder about this event? Let us marvel about the resurrection! This Jesus is the Lord not only over creation, but also over life and death. He is the very source of life, for He has life, eternal life in Him.

What He brings us is truly the Good News. Think about your identity. He knows you. He knows that your core identity is in Him. Through your baptism You are sons and daughters of God the Father in Jesus.

This is who you are, in this life, and in the life to come. Nothing can change that. And because the Triune God is your loving Father, you can be assured that He will provide for you.

He will give you your daily bread, He will open His hand and will satisfy your desires. He is near to all who call on Him in truth, that is, in Jesus' name.

You may wonder about your worth? For not everyone is great in the eyes of this world. Rest assured, you are precious in the eyes of Jesus and the Father. Before you were born, He knew you.

Before you came into this world, He already has done everything to have you with Him forever. This is how precious you are in God's eyes. This is how much He longs to be reunited with you when this age is over.

Where is our Christian hope? What are the most beautiful experiences in our life? I would say, love. True, genuine, self-sacrificial love, when we are loved this way, and we can love this way.

However, you know that all our relationships in this age are tainted by sin. Even genuine love is tainted by selfishness, by fear to lose our loved one, or by fear to be betrayed. And it always ends with death.

But now, the death itself is defeated. Jesus, the Son of God has done it. And what awaits all His brothers and sisters is His Kingdom of eternal love. Our hope is to be in God's presence, where His pure, holy, powerful and infinite love will embrace us.

Where we, purified of our sinfulness, will be able to be united with the Holy God in loving relationships, and where we will be able to love others and to be loved to the extent we now can't even imagine.

For us death is not the end of all hopes, but the beginning of infinitely better life. And all of this, both here and in the age to come is given to us in Jesus. In Jesus as He comes to us, to bless us, to be with us. Right here.

This is what we can learn from this event. Jesus from Nazareth is the very source of all God's blessings. Sure, He didn't look like the source of all blessings. But He was and is.

And today His Church, His body on earth doesn't look like we could be the source of all blessings either. But we are. Not on our own, but because we are God's people, and He Himself dwells with us.

The gospel of freedom and autonomy that the world preaches, sooner or later ends in hopelessness, brokenness and emptiness, regardless how aggressively it is advertised. It takes away our freedom to be who we are created to be, and it separates us from the love of Jesus, and from the fellowships with all saints.

But with Jesus there is joy and peace, shalom, there is abundance of grace and love, there is forgiveness and eternal life, there is true wisdom and fellowship in the Holy Spirit and infinite riches of God's blessings.

And He is with us, right here. How blessed we are. Amen.