

**Homily for August 4, 2002
18th Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle A**

By Father Charles Bowes

**Isaiah 55:1-3
Romans 8:35, 37-39
Matthew 14:13-21**

Can God spread a table in the wilderness?

Deep down...really deep in our souls we don't quite believe that God can spread a table in the wilderness – specifically in our wilderness or in the world in which we dwell. And it's that hesitancy, that lack of faith, which needs a new creation born of a question of Jesus, which will unleash the Father's invasion of our hearts.

Can God spread a table in the wilderness? This question was posed by the hungry, thirsty Israelites, loudly complaining as they journeyed through the desert after their escape from Egypt. And we remember the stories of how numerous times and in a number of ways God sustained those folks in their need, offering first water from the rock, then manna and meat so that they ate and were well-filled.

These biblical images of food and water were meant to reveal the compassionate, maternal face of God who nourishes, whose loving kindness came to meet the Israelites at the level of their most basic need.

But God's gifts of food did not lead to a confident faith or to an enduring trust. On the contrary, at each turn in the road the people continued to sin, not believing in God's works. They tested God in their

hearts – they doubted – rebelliously demanding that their cravings be satisfied.

Well, what about us? We have seen the maternal face of God who nourishes – in some way – through our families, from friends. We, too, have been invited to eat what is good and to enjoy rich food. In a way that far surpasses God's gifts to the Israelites of old, we've been given the grain of heaven and eaten the bread of angels. Yet, like those old-time folks, we act much like the Israelites. Finding ourselves in situations of difficulty, disappointment or disillusionment, we quickly raise the question, "Can God spread a table in the wilderness?"

Can God spread a table in our wilderness? Do we genuinely doubt God's saving power and saving presence in our lives? We test God, our complaints and demands attesting to our self-centered sense of entitlement and our failure to see all as God's gift.

In our gospel, Matthew 14, we meet a Jesus who mirrors the face of God who nourishes. Jesus has such a sense of God and God's purpose and care that he could actually show that, mirror that from a deep well of faith and meet the people in the daily needs of their lives. Quick to recognize their hunger, Jesus did not share his disciples' hesitation about feeding a large crowd, nor was he inclined to send them away hungry. Instead, he promptly spread a table in the wilderness

for those who gathered to hear him. He blessed and broke the bread and gave it to his disciples to be distributed. My prayerful question for that performance is a simple one: "Lord, where did you get that sense of your father's love, so deep and so abiding? How did you come to know God so closely that you were not afraid to trust completely and be the avenue of God's love?"

Unlike Jesus, I think you and I often lack awareness of our own genuine hunger for a faith so deep that God can act in us. And as a result, we do not seek the nourishment that will meet our deepest need. Rather than accept the plate that holds some loaves and fish which we find through Jesus, we seek to satisfy our desires and cravings through our addictions to food, drink, material goods, money or power, relying on them to fill our hungry minds and empty hearts – and we end up hungrier still because none of it satisfies. It's a food of our imagination and of our making, while all the time we yearn for a food that God gives and that God creates. Is it any wonder that so many in our society are plagued by eating disorders of all sorts? We go after the food we crave, forgetting that this bread of angels which we receive here is a gift and can only be received as a gift never earned. That's a whole different way of thinking – it means that we are open to the surprise and to the unexpected, even to the point of not knowing for what we should ask: "Lord, how did you put yourself in a frame of mind to rely totally on God and to receive only what God wanted to give you?" Obviously, Jesus found he could feed thousands because he wasn't relying on himself to do it. He became the vehicle for God – the table upon which the banquet would be set. The altar in every Catholic church represents Christ – the table to which we journey – vested or plain-clothed appropriately so that all may approach from all four

sides of equal dimensions open totally to the invasion of God.

And I do believe that because it's so hard for us to receive from God what God wishes to give, it's also very difficult for us to respond to the needs of others who are hungry. If all the food and things we seek don't satisfy our hunger, is it any wonder that we are reluctant to share these with others, knowing they can't possibly satisfy them either? Our plea is exactly that of the disciples in Matthew 14: "Lord, all we have here are a few fish and a couple loaves of bread." We know we don't have much to give. And Jesus' response is simply, "You give them something to eat yourselves." Oddly enough, the key to giving is rooted in our capacity to receive – to receive what God wishes to give and to receive on God's terms, not ours. "Lord, what enabled you to receive what your Father wanted to give you? What was your faith like that enabled you to hear the voice of God and be free to share all you had with those in need?"

In the silence that follows from such questions, we will find ourselves empowered to share all that we have...and to discover that it was not even ours to begin with, but that all is a gift and as a gift can readily be shared and joyously so with all the world in need.

One does not have to be wealthy in order to have the freedom of the spirit of Jesus Christ as illustrated in this story about Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Mother Teresa brought rice to a starving family, only to have the mother of the family disappear with the rice. She reappeared a few moments later, informing Mother Teresa that she had taken half the rice to her neighbor who was also in desperate need of food for her family.

Can God spread a table
in the wilderness?