

Yogi Berra, the great American baseball player, was known for his unusual and creative use of the English language. In giving directions to his home, for example, he often told people, "When you come to the fork in the road, take it." His formula for success, as some heard it, was this: "Ninety per cent perspiration, and the rest mostly just plain hard work." Referring to a Steve McQueen Movie he had seen said: "He must have made that before he died." On a close run baseball game: "It ain't over till it's over and "it's like déjà vu all over again." And on going to friends funeral: I always go to other people's funerals, otherwise they won't come to yours." Then there was the time he went to a restaurant by himself and ordered a large pizza. The waitress asked if he would like it cut into four or eight pieces. "Better make it four," he replied. I'm not hungry enough to eat eight."

Yogi Berra may have had a few things to learn about food service, but those who followed Jesus into the Galilean hillsides were very pleased that Jesus was able to cut five loaves and two fish into enough pieces to satisfy a huge crowd.

It is interesting to note that the writer of Matthew's gospel is writing to a community that is primarily composed of Jewish Christians. He makes this clear in the way he opens his gospel. Verses 1-17 of Matthew 1 move in stages through the memorial gardens of Israelite history, stopping briefly to read the headstones on nearly forty sites. These are representatives of the major eras of Hebrew history, Matthew tells us. This, of course, makes us immediately aware that Jesus enters a particular history. He does not appear without a context, Jesus, according to Matthew, is the "Son of David" and the "Son of Abraham."

This is quite a loaded statement, for those two great figures were called by God to establish the character of the nation of Israel. Moreover, Matthew goes on in chapter 1 to describe Jesus' unique birth.

While people from other traditions who read this gospel might not easily grasp it, for devout Jews it was a brilliant revelation. They would immediately place this birth alongside those of Samson and Samuel, two of the greatest deliverers their history had produced. In each instance a boy was born under unusual circumstances, and on each occasion an angel came to clarify God's designs. In other words, Matthew wants us to know up front and all the way through that Jesus is the uniquely birthed and commissioned Messiah of the Jews.

With this in mind we are helped to understand why Matthew can quickly relate to us the story, of Jesus feeding the crowds in what might appear at first to be an almost cavalier way. If Jesus is indeed the Messiah, as all the signs indicate, he obviously wields divine power and purpose. Therefore, if the God of ancient Israel made it a concern to feed those who came out into the wilderness to experience God's leading and provision; people in Jesus' day could expect the same thing from him. In the deserts of the Sinai Peninsula God provided manna to the hungry tribes of Israel; Jesus, as God's agent, makes sure there is food enough for the famished Jewish crowds. But that only leads us to the second and more important thing Matthew wants us to think about. Who are these people that Jesus feeds? Who would be so foolish as to go unprepared into the wilderness running after Jesus? Why would anybody do that in the first place? On a quest for purpose or identity? Then as now hunger is in every one of us and each of us finds ourselves in strange wilderness places from time to time as we look and seek. But what will we find? And how will it become visible to us? Where will we make the connection between God and us? However it happens, according to Matthew, it will be

when, we first believe that Jesus has what it takes to satisfy our cravings. George Herbert 17th Century Welsh Anglican priest and divine penned a brilliant picture of the aching in each of our souls. In his poem, "The Pulley," he portrayed God at the moment of creation, sprinkling his new human creature with treasures kept in a jar beside him. These were God's finest resources, given now as gifts to the crown of his universe: beauty, wisdom, honour, pleasure.... All were scattered liberally in the genetic recipe of our kind. When the jar of God's treasures was nearly empty, God put the lid on it. The angels wondered why God did not finish the human concoction, leaving one great resource still in its container. This last quality, God told the angels, is "rest." But God would not grant that divine treasure to the human race. The angels, of course, asked why and God said "Let him be rich and weary, that at least, If goodness lead him not, yet weariness, may toss him to my breast." Herbert saw well that the strong talents and marvellous abilities of humanity would make us like impatient children, eager to strike out on our own and find our self-made destinies. Only if God would hold back a sense of full satisfaction from our souls would we search our way back home. It is the creative act of God that gives us freedom. Yet, when we use our abilities for our own ends we tend to lose what is best in ourselves and often demean it in others, and push like adolescents away from our spiritual parent. Only if we become restless to find the face of God in some longing for home will we regain a glimpse of our own best faces reflected back toward us in the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Here is where the hunger found in Matthew's story connects with us. We are the people who go out into the wilderness seeking something to give us meaning. And like the crowds in Jesus day, we lack the resources to take along anything of lasting value. We would die in the wilderness, left to our own devices. As with the crowds around Jesus, there is no food to keep us alive unless God does a miracle. Desire leads us on the quest, but only a miracle of grace will keep us from dying there.

Food is a very big part of our lives. Hunger can be a time clock ticking inside, regulating the hours of our days with calculated passion. Or it can be a biological need, demanding fuel stops on our restless race. Even more, hunger functions as a psychological drive, forcing us to crave chocolate when we lack love, to over eat when anxious. But deeper than all of these things is our search for meaning beyond the drudgery and repetition of our daily activities. It is a spiritual need that each person has to know that he or she is not alone in this gigantic and sometimes unkind maze of life. Hunger is what the writer of Ecclesiastes meant when he said that God has "set eternity in the hearts of men" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Hunger is the pilgrimage of the soul. In other words, the old adage is true: "You are what you eat." So life beckons us to follow the latest fad, to search for the newest fulfilment, to seek the richest treasure. We consume and devour until we are fed up with life, so to speak, and still we want more. You are hungry, and you are what you eat. The cravings of your soul will not be stilled. A meal will reset the alarm of your biological clock. Food will keep your hungry body going. Hot chips and a lemonade will stop the munchies for a while. But what are you feeding your soul?

St Augustine of Hippo reflected on the spiritual character of our race. "Man is one of your creatures, Lord," he said, "and his instinct is to praise you. The thought of you stirs him so deeply that he cannot be content unless he praises you, because you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you." What are you eating today? Tomorrow and next week those who are close to you will know whether there was any eternal nourishment in your diet. Amen.

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