

*But this He said to prove him, for He Himself knew what He would do.*

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Today we pray in the collect, *Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people...that they bring forth the fruit of good works.* In this morning's Gospel we see our Lord *stir up the wills* of faithful Philip and Andrew, and by doing so He brings them to the limit of their faith. This Gospel passage often raises an interesting question, "*Does God test us?*" Which is then followed with, "*why does God test us?*" These are the biggest questions for all the critics of Christianity, or even worse, for Christians believing that they serve a God who experiments with their faith. But as we see with Philip and Andrew this is not the case at all. Instead, we see Jesus Christ lovingly prove them in order to encourage and build up their faith.

We remember that St. Philip and St. Andrew were disciples of Jesus Christ, who had followed Him everywhere, and who had witnessed firsthand His many miracles. But today they are confronted with a different need, a multitude of hungry people in the middle of nowhere. To feed the multitude required a different sort of miracle than healing the sick or raising the dead. And so, Our Lord turns to Philip and asks him, *where may we buy bread that these may eat?* And then comes Andrew, *Lord we have five loaves of bread and two small fish, but what good are these among so many?*

This conversation in itself is remarkable. Remember that Jesus, while tempted in the wilderness by Satan, could have turned stones into bread. He has the supernatural ability to tell His disciples where they must throw their fishing nets only to discover that their boats had nearly been sunk by so great a catch of fish. Yet Jesus asks Philip, *Where shall we buy bread that these may eat, how can we feed all these people?* The disciples are stumped for they have no idea what Jesus has in mind. Philip and Andrew had seen Jesus raise the dead, they had seen Him heal the paralytic, and they knew He could go toe to toe in theological discourse with the scribes and the Pharisees. But like the Israelites of old, their lack of faith raises the question, *can this Jesus feed the multitude?* And like the Israelites of old, Philip and Andrew witness first hand that He can provide. From five loaves of bread and two small fish, the Lord feeds the multitude until they had their fill, with twelve baskets left over. Just as the Lord had fed the Israelites daily with an abundance of manna and quail *until it came out of their nostrils*, so too the same Lord would fill his people with a superabundance of manna now, not from heaven, but from the earth.

But this lack of faith on Philip and Andrew's part is hereditary in a sense. For the Lord had also tested the Israelites when they wandered in the wilderness, to prove their faith, to teach them faith in Him and Him alone. The Lord had proven to the Israelites that He can protect and deliver them. God had proven to them that He is a

great general; he destroyed the Egyptian army without a battle. He proved to them that He would always make good on His promises. He delivered them from Egypt, He divided the red sea and they walked across on dry ground. But can He give them food to eat and water to drink? We hear this echoed in this morning's Epistle, and Jeremiah the prophet assures us that God is indeed able. The Epistle reminds us too that eventually Israel was divided into the Kingdom of Judah and the Kingdom of Israel, but this does not matter to God, for God rules over an undivided people. His Kingdom is an undivided Kingdom, and His Church is an undivided Church which He will make whole and complete by His Omnipotent Word.

The Lord takes Philip and Andrew to the edge of their faith, just as He had with the Israelites, and showed them that they must have a deeper faith in Him. Jesus knows, that like the Israelites of old, Philip and Andrew, like us, have trouble understanding who He is. The test is not for the benefit of Jesus, nor is it entirely for the benefit of the multitude, but for the benefit of Philip and Andrew. Jesus helps them to grow in their faith and understanding of Him and His mission to earth. Jesus shows to the disciples and to the multitude that He has supernatural and divine power. He can take bread and fish and multiply them and feed every one of them with plenty left over. And by doing so, Jesus identifies Himself with the Heavenly Father that had fed the multitude of Israelites as He led them through the desert thousands of years ago. This miracle is a revelation of who Jesus is.

We often forget who Jesus is, we say Jesus is Lord, but then our actions prove otherwise. God has a way of bringing this faulty faith to our attention as we see in Philip and Andrew. If Jesus stirred up the faith of His disciples in this way, then He certainly will stir up our faith too. Perhaps the difficult time you have been having lately is a test of your faith. Perhaps the Lord means to take you aside as He did Philip and Andrew, because He desires to see your faith in Him grow. Perhaps He wants to help you understand Him and His love more. So, when we come to a difficult time in our life, or a situation that rocks our faith, let us pray, "*O Lord help my faith and understanding in you grow deeper.*" May God give us the faith to put our whole dependence in Him and Him alone.

Our Lord tested and proved the Israelites, and He fed them with manna from heaven. He tested and proved Andrew and Philip and fed them and the multitude with blessed bread and fish. And He tests and proves each of us, and He feeds us with the bread from His own table. But the bread He gives us is better than the bread that He fed the Israelites with, and better than the bread with which He fed the multitude. For He gives Himself to us in this very bread, for the benefit of our faith and understanding in Him. What better Gospel lesson for us in a world which is daily losing its faith in Jesus Christ? What better Gospel lesson for us with Thanksgiving this very week? What an example we are given for every occasion of our lives in Jesus Christ! May the Lord stir up our faith in Him this coming Advent Season. May

the tumultuous year we have experienced help to bring the message of Advent and Christmas home to us. May we learn to depend on THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS even for our faith. Amen.