

4 Easter (A)

May 3, 2020

“But he answered them, ‘You give them something to eat.’” — Mark 6:37

On my morning walk yesterday, I saw a message written on the pavement in chalk that said, “We will get by.” I smiled when I read it, knowing that it was made there no doubt to give confidence and hope to all who walked along. And, indeed, I felt myself for the moment moved and uplifted by the words.

But as I thought about the message later, I began to question whether this should be the only sentiment we are to feel as we confront the dangers before us. Is it a matter merely of surviving the grief and hardship of this time; or are we being called further to transform this time by making changes in ourselves and in our society (some of them long overdue), changes we then will carry with us into that future which we so impatiently await? Put another way, should we not want so much to get by as to make things better?

I thought of this in connection with Mark’s Gospel today, specifically with Jesus’ words to his disciples who wish to send away the crowd that has gathered to hear him rather than attempt to feed them. ‘Let them take care of themselves’ is what his disciples say in effect; to which Jesus pointedly responds, “YOU give them something to eat” (the emphasis where it belongs).

So, for Jesus, getting by is letting hungry people fend for themselves. Getting by is not believing that there is enough (indeed, as it turns out, more than enough) food to go around, should we but make an actual effort to procure it. And getting by is refusing to accept that that effort, that calling, rests squarely upon our shoulders. “YOU give them something to eat,” he says. It’s important, I think, to note that while Jesus in the story breaks and blesses the bread and fish, it is the disciples whom he instructs to distribute this food. It is they who go among the people bearing God’s bounty, personally giving to famished bodies as well as to hungry souls the gifts both of the earth and of heaven.

But how does all of this fit in right now—now that we find our freedoms constrained and our futures uncertain? More crucially, how do we relate to others around us—in our country and across our world, in our homes, and in our churches—now that a deadly virus keeps us at a distance—literally as well as symbolically, emotionally as well as spiritually? Does getting by mean attending only to our own individual needs and comforts? Is getting by a matter solely of being content—of having enough until such time that we are free to resume our lives in the ways we remember them? We say we yearn to return to normal, but what will that look like? Will it be something approaching a newer, more perfect world, or will it be simply the old and familiar world, the one that we’re used to, with all its benefits and all its inequities, all its joys but all its wounds still intact?

Now, don’t get me wrong! There are so many “normal”—that is to say wonderful and beautiful—things I want to get back to, principal among these seeing all of you face to face, and knowing fully again that contentment which only the love of a church family can provide. And I want so desperately to return to the “normality” of God’s grace, to the familiar strength and joy that we receive each time we receive the Body and Blood of Christ in the Holy Eucharist. I know that that is your desire too.

But we also know of (and have in fact seen magnified by this pandemic) conditions and circumstances that have plagued our common life as much as the ravages of any virus. We

have seen that those who have made the greatest sacrifices during this crisis have often been those who are the least able to make them. We rightly laud the heroism of health care providers and first responders; but, at the same time, we're likely to forget the minimum wage cashier at our local supermarket, or the worker who helps prepare our food in crowded and unsafe packing houses. We can easily forget the homeless for whom "sheltering in place" may mean an empty subway station, or the jobless who, without unemployment compensation or adequate health insurance, are enduring daily hardships from which they and their families may never recover. Some of us may feel we are successfully getting by; others may fear they are quickly going under.

The example Jesus gives in today's gospel, however, shows us a better way both to live in this present moment and to anticipate the challenges of the future. If we consider this painful time just as an interlude between one sameness and another (an 'old normal' and a 'new normal' as we are tending to call it), we will have learned nothing and our sacrifices may be said to have been in vain. Only if we take Our Lord's direct command to his disciples seriously will this struggle have any lasting meaning. Only if we do as Jesus commands, and give to our famished world "something to eat"—real food, real hope, real economic and social justice, real peace of body and soul—only then can it be said that we are getting by. Only when we seek reconciliation with those we have hurt or driven away—among our friends, in our families, and in our parish—can it be said truly that we are getting by. For only then can it be said that in opening back our country and our world we will have opened wide our hearts also.

Do I wish that that opening would be tomorrow? You bet I do!! God knows, I love my creature comforts as anyone, although I think I have surrendered very few of them. But I do want to see all of you once more; I want to enjoy once more a downtown Frederick restaurant. I want to walk around without a mask; and I want to give the heartiest and longest of handshakes ever in the history of the greeting of The Peace!

But I also want to try to help ensure a safer world, a wider world, and, finally, a better world than the one we left behind only a few months ago. I want to "get by" by getting on with the work God has given us to do. I want to try, at least, to walk amid the hungry and hopeless, the lonely and searching (as the disciples did) with loaves of bread cradled in my arms—food in miraculous abundance that our love and skill and courage can together provide (though, like the disciples, we seldom think so). I want to give someone something to eat, something they will not have to go off and search for on their own.

May I ask you please to join me in exploring this new "new normal" (that's what I'll call it)? Please admonish me when I am deterred or fail as an example. Please cheer me when I get discouraged. And please help me discover again, as I will for you, all the nourishing, soaring, life-giving spirit of our Risen Christ. Amen.

Many Blessings—and a Happy, Holy Eastertide!
Fr. Gordon+