

+

This morning as we begin our preparations for the Advent and Christmas season we are confronted with an uncomfortable lesson. That uncomfortable lesson is that God often stirs us up, which we pray for explicitly in this morning's Collect, so that we will bring forth the fruit of good works, the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Then, in the Gospel we find that Jesus asks a question of His disciple Philip *to prove him: for he himself knew what he would do*. Jesus is not just going to prove Himself, and His ability to work miracles to Philip, He will of course do this and much more, Jesus is going to give Philip a test of faith, to help Him grow spiritually. This reveals to us an important truth, Jesus is not just concerned with healing the sick, or raising the dead, or teaching the lessons of the Kingdom of God through His parables, but also aiding His disciples and followers to grow spiritually.

To help us grow spiritually Jesus is going to stir us up, to prove us, or test us, a shocking truth as we begin this Season. We are reminded of this now so that we will be more receptive to preparing ourselves spiritually this coming Advent before we meet Christ sacramentally and spiritually on Christmas Day, the dress rehearsal for meeting Jesus when our lives, or when the world, has ended. In fact, the secret of the Christian life is that if we are to ever become the good Christians we aspire to be, if we are ever to grow closer to Jesus, we must allow ourselves to be spiritually stirred up, to be proven, to be tested. This is the meaning of the Epistle lesson in Jeremiah, God promises a Messiah, but in order to receive the Messiah, and to enter into the Promised Land that Jesus is going to usher in, they have to grow spiritually beyond identifying with *The Lord liveth which brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt*, they have to move beyond being the people that God brought through the Exodus, to being among that number of people which God brought up, *the seed of the house of Israel*, who had been gathered from the four corners of the earth. The same is true with Philip and the rest of the disciples, they had to be stirred up, to be proven, and tested, if they were ever going to stick with Jesus after the Crucifixion and Resurrection, if they were ever going to take the Gospels to the four corners of the earth, if they were going to carry on the work of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel for this morning shows us exactly how Jesus stirs up, or tests, His disciples. A great multitude of men, women, and children follow the Lord out into the wilderness to sit at His feet, to hear Him preach. And He is moved to compassion for them, they had come all this way and many likely had nothing to eat. So moved by Divine Charity, Jesus asks His disciple Philip, *where may we buy bread that they may eat?* Philip looks around him and makes a very practical reply, *Lord we do not have enough money to buy bread for everyone here, that they may all take even a little*. What gets translated as a *pennyworth*, is really a *denarii*, a day's wage. Philip tells Jesus that almost a year's worth of wages would not buy enough bread to feed the crowd. And even if they had the money, the local villages would not have enough bread for them to buy. To Philip, at that moment, the situation is hopeless. Who can blame him? We know a hopeless situation when we see one. Regardless of the type of food Jesus chose to give to the crowd, there was not enough of any food within walking distance to feed so many people. Then Andrew walks over, perhaps he has some idea of what Jesus is capable of and brings to Jesus a little boy who has five barley loaves and two small fish, a typical meal for the poor. Maybe he thinks they can make an example of the poor kid and inspire everyone to share the food they might have hidden

away in their pockets. But we know how the story ends, Jesus takes the poor meal, blesses it, and feeds the multitude, five thousand men, and numberless women and children until they are all full, with not just bread but fish also. All who witnessed this miracle, including Philip and Andrew, were amazed at the miracle that Jesus had worked and said, *this is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world*, that He is the promised Messiah, the Christ.

In stirring up Philip, in proving him, or testing him, Jesus pushes Philip's imagination and faith to its limit. Even Andrew, the first disciple, who brought his brother Peter to Jesus, and brings the boy with the loaves and fish to Jesus, is amazed by this miracle. Jesus knows the faith of Philip and Andrew and to help make their faith in Him stronger He points out to them the impossibility of the situation and then works a miracle. He does this so that their faith may be all the stronger, that they have no doubt that He is the Son of God and God in the flesh, and to prepare them for their new lives in Him. But let us not think that this was the end of the testing for Philip. And notice that Jesus does not declare which disciple had passed the test. There are no comparisons made at all between Andrew and Philip. Andrew is not praised, and Philip is not reprimanded. This is because Spiritual growth, Christian maturity, is not a competition, but a life-long process. It is a process very similar to how children grow and mature, just less obvious. There is no way to weigh ourselves spiritually, or to measure our spiritual height, there are no charts of percentiles to compare ourselves against. In fact, the only measurement that we can make is how we measure up to Jesus Christ.

As we begin our preparations for our Christmas festivities, let us use this season to our advantage, and remember that Christ wishes *to stir up our wills and our faith*. In *stirring up* our faith, He challenges us to not get caught up in the materialism of the secular holiday, and to seek the true gift and the true feast of Christmas that we have desired for so long. That true gift and true feast which many try in vain to replace with the best the world can offer. In *stirring up* our faith, Christ *stirs up* in us the fruits of the Holy Spirit that they may mature in us and help us to feast this Christmas in His presence, and to receive the true gift which Christ offers, the gift of a new life in Him. Amen.