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*Isa 25:6-10a; Matt 15:29-37*

“My heart is moved with pity” (Matt 15:32).

In today’s Gospel, Matthew summarizes Mark’s much longer and more detailed account of Jesus’ compassion for the crowds and his ministry of healing and nurturing to the crowds (see Mark 6:30-44). In both accounts, Jesus expresses his heartfelt pity, or *hesed*, a Hebrew word for unconditional love. This is the kind of love God shows his people, and Jesus is presented here as the human face of divine mercy.

In this time of Advent, Jesus’ power to heal people is also a reflection of the Incarnation. He is God incarnate, the Word made flesh, so any contact between Jesus and others is an encounter with God. The sick, blind, mute, lame and deformed people brought to Jesus are made whole again because the original *Imago Dei*, image of God, is restored in them.

This restoration is communicated through the flesh of Jesus encountering the broken humanity of the crowds. We can visualize the mass of sick people being carried by their families and friends and laid at the feet of Jesus. Everyone he touches or turns his gaze on is healed. Or we might imagine the astonishing effect of a young doctor moving through a crowded waiting room or hospital corridor, and everyone he or she passes suddenly recovers and sits up.

This is what the Incarnation means. Jesus is the icon of God, the new Adam, our firstborn older brother who has gone before us to reveal the power of grace to restore us to union with God, destined for life with God in eternity. In Jesus we glimpse what we are becoming. By baptism, we are incorporated into the mystical body of Christ, our human nature is perfected by grace and given a wholeness made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

It makes perfect sense that this display of healing then moves into a story about the Eucharist. The multiplication of the loaves and fishes reveals the promise of continued healing for us through the sacred meal where we commemorate the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Jesus gives the crowd physical food as a pledge of even greater food, the mystery of his own body and blood, the fulfillment of Passover and our Exodus from sin and death and his accompaniment with us to the promised land of eternal life.

The two great solemnities of the liturgical year, Christmas and Easter, are joined in the mystery of the Incarnation. We are saved because Jesus became human, and we are his disciples because we imitate his humanity by sharing his sacrifice on the cross. We die with him and rise with him to reveal the divine image and likeness in us. Broken, we are healed. Lost we are found. Dying, we are raised to eternal life. This is the first and greatest gift of Christmas.

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