

## FEEDING THE FIVE THOUSAND Matthew 14:14-22

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Today's famous incident of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, which has inspired many beautiful sermons and profound commentaries, is found in all four Gospels. St. Luke's Gospel tells us that when Jesus and His disciples came ashore from the Sea of Galilee, they went to a "lonely place" near Bethsaida. Large crowds of people followed Him by foot from the towns, and they were already ashore waiting for Him. The crowd consisted of five thousand, not counting women and children. In St. Mark's Gospel we are informed that besides healing the sick, the Lord also preached and taught the crowd many things. This lasted until evening when the issue of the need to eat was brought up by the Lord's disciples.

The fact that our Savior was with the crowd until evening and even afterwards implies that Jesus was with them for a long time. In order for Jesus to teach the crowd, there must have been a considerable modicum of silence. It doesn't take more than a few people whispering or talking to disturb the silence and interfere with the Lord's preaching. It is extraordinary and remarkable that over five thousand people could maintain such a level of self-control in order for the Lord to be able to teach them, yet we surmise that this must be true. The only human voice that broke the silence, perhaps, was an occasional sound from one of the children, or the rustling of someone shifting in their seated position. Otherwise, it would not have been possible for the Lord to address such a large crowd and be heard, even if only a portion of the crowd broke the silence by speaking to each other. This silence reminds me of an article which appeared in *Orthodox Life* about a visit to the Holy Mountain Athos: "It was mid-day on 6 August 1968. The motorboat from Daphni stopped at the harbour of Simonopetra. No one else had landed, so after a friendly greeting from a monk on the jetty, I started climbing alone up the steep path as the motorboat went on down the coast. I sat down in the shade and looked out across the sea, listening to the silence.

*All was still.*

This stillness, this silence is everywhere, pervades all, is the very essence of the Holy Mountain. The distant sound of a motorboat serves only to punctuate the intensity of the quietness; a lizard's sudden rustling among dry leaves, a frog plopping into a fountain, are loud and startling sounds, but merely emphasize the immense stillness. Often as one walks over the great stretches of wild country which form much of this sacred ground, following paths where every stone breathes prayers, it is impossible to hear a sound of any kind. Even in the monastery churches, where the silence is, as it were, made more profound by the darkness, by the beauty and by the sacred quality of the place, it seems that the reading and chanting of priests and monks in the endless rhythm of their daily and nightly ritual is no more than a thin fringe of a limitless ocean of silence.

But this stillness, this silence, is far more than a mere absence of sound. It has a positive quality, a quality of fullness, of plenitude, of the eternal Peace which is there reflected in the Veil of the Mother of God, enshrouding and protecting her Holy Mountain, offering inner silence, peace of heart, to those who dwell there and to those who come with openness of heart to seek this blessing."<sup>1</sup>

In 1 Kings 19:9-13 God speaks with the prophet Elijah on Mount Horeb: "And behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire **a still small voice.**" This still small voice was the voice of God.

It is no wonder that it is so quiet on the Holy mountain, because the foundation of Orthodox spirituality and monasticism is *stillness* and *silence*. Noise is associated with disturbance, disorderliness and the activity of the demons; stillness and silence are associated with peace

of soul and communion with the Mysteries of God. The very activity of Orthodox monastics is called *hesychia* (ἡσυχία), which means “stillness,” or “silence.” Silence gives birth to all the virtues. The Holy Fathers place the virtue of silence at the summit of the virtues, for without it no virtue is able to remain in the soul of man. There is a famous photograph of the saintly Patriarch Pavle of Serbia riding the public bus and quietly saying his prayers. He always took the bus for transportation, and all of the noise and sounds of the city around him did not disturb his inner quietness and concentration on prayer. The same is recounted about the Elder Paisios who, while traveling with a group of other passengers on a bus, remained undisturbed by the noise around him, immersed in the prayer of the heart. Living in the world it is not always possible for us to flee exterior noise, but we should always make and find the time to seek to preoccupy ourselves with how to be close to God by means of prayer and holy thoughts. It is not far fetched for us, if we seek “the one thing needful” with diligence, to attain that inner stillness and quietness, that no exterior noise can disturb, for our hearts and our minds, like His Holiness Patriarch Pavle and the Elder Paisios, will be united with God. Amen!

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1. 'Silence over Mount Athos', *Orthodox Life*, Nov.—Dec. 1968, p. 33. Quoted from “The Time of the Spirit: Readings Through the Christian Year,” Selected and Edited by George Every, Richard Harries, and Kallistos Ware, SVS Press, Crestwood, NY, 1984, page 210.



Saintly Patriarch Pavle of Serbia (1914-2009) riding the city bus.