

26th July 2015, 8th after Trinity
John 6, 1-21; Ephesians 3, 14-21

Well, what about *that*? Two terrific, in-your-face miracles in one reading – feeding 5,000 people with five rolls and two small fish; and Jesus walking on the water! What more could we ask for? Well maybe – in our questioning age – the ability to believe they really did happen just like that.

Some people have tried to explain away the miraculous: there must have been just enough food for everyone among them; it simply needed the example of the boy's offering, to prompt those with plenty to share among those with nothing. Or maybe the Greek words for Jesus walking 'on the lake' really meant 'beside the lake', and the boat was already almost at the shore. But what about the twelve basketfuls left over? And 'three to four miles' out is nowhere near the opposite shore. I'll spare you the pages of erudite argument which rubbishes those rationalizing theories, because the real clincher is that explaining away the miraculous entirely misses the real points that the Gospel is making. For the miracles are *signs* – signs of something even more important than the event itself.

At times, Jesus had to try and escape the crowds – for rest and quiet and prayer, and to teach the disciples so that they could continue his work, but he also showed real compassion for them. He healed the sick and fed the hungry whether or not they became disciples, or heeded his teaching, or even bothered to say Thank You. Yet his actions also had a much deeper meaning. Even the disciples had real trouble in getting the message – it was a slow, hard learning curve for them. In this passage Philip, presented with the problem of how to feed this lot, sees it only in terms of quantity and money – a very modern response. Andrew, approached by the boy with his picnic, acknowledges the offer but then rather belittles it – understandably, but he's rather dismissive of the boy's naive yet generous offer. Jesus can use the small, well-meant gesture; maybe especially the spontaneous generosity of a child – one of those who can get into the Kingdom ahead of the learned and wise. And from that offer Jesus can feed the whole crowd, with basketsful left over, more than enough for the twelve disciples; perhaps recalling the Passover cup flowing over – symbolically enough for the twelve tribes of Israel.

So what does this signify – this sign? In a long chapter – more instalments over the next few Sundays – we find reference to the Exodus and the Passover: of a bread more lasting than the manna in the wilderness; of a new Exodus into freedom; even hints of a new Passover sacrifice: something great is in the offing. It all leads up to the teaching that the *true* bread, the bread of life, is to be found not in the manna nor in the miraculous loaves, but in Jesus himself. In him they could find what truly satisfies, what brings life in all its abundance.

Meanwhile, there is more to be discovered just in today's snippet of text. The crowd keep following Jesus 'because they saw the signs he was doing for the sick'. They want healing, for themselves or for loved ones, some are simply curious – to see if he really can perform miracles. They're full of very basic human needs and desires, and are not

ready with 'ears to hear and eyes to see' what the signs really signify. Jesus had gone up the mountain with his disciples, not merely for peace and quiet. Mountains are symbolically close to the heavens, places to be in touch with the Beyond, and in touch with the 'higher' part of our own nature. Later, when they try to seize him and make him King, he escapes up the mountain again. The last thing Jesus wanted was to be a new King David, leading a glorious army of a proudly patriotic Israel. Maybe the temptation was there; like the last of the three temptations in the wilderness – to do homage to the devil of worldly power – what Jesus could achieve if that were his, seeing all those nations stretched out below him! From that high mountain he saw the temptation, but it also enabled him to speak from his higher nature: 'Be gone, Satan, homage is due to the Lord God alone'. So this time, he needs to escape from the crowd's worldly, militaristic idea of Messiah, losing many followers as a result. And probably to escape also from the 'crowd' within, not just the sheer harassment of his (scarcely time even to eat), also from the crowd of mixed emotions and motives which clearly he felt.

He flees to the mountain top, a place to encounter God for both Moses and Elijah and for his own transfiguration. He needs to re-connect with the divine nature, demonstrated later that night to the terror of the disciples in the boat – again a sign of a new Exodus: 'When the waters saw you O God ... the very deep trembled. Your way was through the sea, your path through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen.' But 'I AM', Jesus says, speaking in the name of God, 'do not be afraid.'

We get so hung up on questions of fact: what *actually happened*? The Gospels are offering us a life-enhancing message, the Good News of God's love for us; the good news of the Bread of Life – news that God invites us to share in his own nature, to 'eat the flesh of the Son of Man'. The symbolism is shocking, but everyday language cannot cope. The writer of Ephesians tries another way, in today's reading: 'I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith... may you have the power to comprehend... what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to *know* the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.'

Harold Stringer