

**PROPER 13 YEAR A  
BLACKSTONE ST LUKE'S**

*Matthew 14:13-21*

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

\*\*\*\*\*

After a long hot day teaching outdoors, Jesus hopes for a little down time, so he gets into a boat and pushes off to paddle down the shoreline looking for a bit of peace and quiet. We can, many of us, totally identify with that urge. Or we used to, pre-pandemic. As Kenneth Grahame wrote in that most delightful of books, the "Wind in the Willows", "There is nothing - absolutely nothing - half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats." Oh

how I, a life-long sailor, agree, and Jesus seems to feel the same.

“Now when Jesus heard this...” Heard what? The verses chosen by the Lectionarists do not tell us. But we can read for ourselves the verses before this day’s selection. Jesus has just learned of the murder of John the Baptist. Is that why he got into a boat and rowed down the lakeshore, to avoid the security services?

But the crowds follow him on foot from the towns. Duty calls: Jesus straightaway starts to heal the sick. He is the *ideal* first responder, prioritizing the urgent needs of others before his own need for rest and relaxation.

Waiting until evening, waiting until the very end of a tiring working day, the disciples then tell Jesus that the crowds are hungry. “What are you going to do about it? *You* do something about it.” says Jesus.

Ah, the disciples! How often their first reaction is to think of reasons for *not* doing something! True, Jesus suggested they not send the crowds off to the local Food Lion. But at least the disciples are good at one thing: inventory. To Jesus’ question, “What resources have you?” They replied, “Very little – a few loaves and a couple of fish but that won’t do.”

At this point, preachers of a reduced merely social gospel will cite the following well-worn cliché: “Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; show him how to catch fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.” Some of the disciples were fishermen. Did they roll up their sleeves, weave some nets, and get fishing, or teach fly-casting?

They did not. And so we require a miracle.

Other preachers try to dodge this difficult miracle by saying that the crowds were shamed into sharing the food they had concealed in their robes' pockets, and they sat on the grass and had a happy evening picnic and tidied up afterwards, twelve baskets of bread scraps to make croutons, probably. But this is unavoidably a miracle story and it is not about sharing, or picnics.

Then Jesus *takes* the food, asks God's *blessing*, *breaks* the bread, and the disciples *distribute* it, and all are satisfied. Here we have a fore-telling of the institution of the Holy Eucharist at the Last Supper on the night before our Lord was handed over to be crucified. Here are the four-fold acts re-enacted in every celebration of the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood in every Christian Church down twenty centuries. "Do this in remembrance of me."

Nothing wrong with feeding the hungry: it is our Christian duty, a way of imitating Christ.

However, do you hear a niggling little echo of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness to turn stones into bread and feed the hungry? The tempter asks Jesus to do a feeding miracle "to prove you are the Son of God". Jesus refuses, as we all remember.

Now back to today's Gospel reading. The issue isn't whether Jesus was asked to turn limestone into bread in the wilderness, but today to turn some bread into lots of bread. The issue then was "IF you are the son of God...." And that is not what this story teaches. Nowhere in the

Feeding of the Five Thousand does the Evangelist say, "And that PROVES Jesus is the Son of God and exercises God's mighty power." For centuries that has been preached as the moral of the story. No such suggestion is even hinted at in this Gospel reading. Read the Gospel.

If the Evangelist wanted to say this feeding miracle proves Jesus is God's Son, Matthew, (or Mark, Luke, or John) could have said so. None of them did.

If they had, the problem then would arise, "What about all the rest of the starving down the ages? Millions and millions of men (plus women and children) have died of starvation with no miraculous loaves and fishes provided by God or anyone else. Where were the loaves and fishes then?"

I have seen the dead bodies of children in Africa who have died of malnutrition. I too have questioned the non-Gospel interpretation of this miracle.

This crowd is hungry, not malnourished or starving. Is the Feeding of the Five Thousand (besides women and children), which is simply an account of *a one-off event*, enough proof revealing the divinity of Christ? Are our Lord's miracle-working, multiplicative powers over bread and fish *once* enough to prove he is the eternal Christ of God?

Possibly, for some people. But before we leap to our feet shouting "Bravo! Fortissimo! YAY GOD!!" please notice something very odd. You and I have heard many Gospel miracle stories. We gloss over the fact that this one is

strangely different. You see, something is missing. Did you spot it? Look again!

Miracle stories end with a Big Reaction of the disciples, or the crowd, or the on-lookers. "Gee whiz", they always say, in Aramaic.

But not here. Not here.

No cries of amazement (not because they have good manners and won't speak with their mouths full). No fear of the supernatural. No increase in faith leading to praise. Here, the disciples and the crowd give no indication that they have witnessed anything out of the ordinary. My goodness, in John (6:14 ff) the crowds are so energized they jump up crying that "Jesus is the prophet who is to come into the world!" And they start to "take him by force to make him king." But here, they just tidy up crumbs.

Yes, I do believe in miracles, even ones so hard to understand. But allow me to direct our attention away from what this story says happened. Allow me to direct our attention to one important word, which says why. Perhaps we can see *in that one word* what Jesus' motive was (not for him to prove he was God's Son) and in so doing reveal something about the character of God himself, as revealed in Christ Jesus. Leave the loaves and fishes: let the birds of the air eat up the crumbs.

The single word is at the end of the fourth line in today's Gospel: "compassion".

Long after the last crumbs and fish scales were brushed off peoples' clothing, God's constant character is revealed in that one word, "compassion".

Now. Sing Wesley's beautiful hymn, Number 659 in our Hymnal: "Love divine, all loves excelling."

And when you reach this line, stop, and say it over and over again: "Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure unbounded love thou art."

The miracle this very day, and always, is that WE, you and I, share *compassion* with our beloved Lord, Jesus Christ. We share not only bread and fish with the hungry, though we are commanded to do so, but we share that divine character trait of love divine incarnate, the motive for Jesus' miracle in today's Gospel reading: compassion.

The ongoing miracle of God's compassionate love is incarnate is in us today. Thanks be to our merciful and loving God.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

--

John Maxwell Kerr, SOfSc,