**THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND Matt. 14:14-22**

Today we return to one of the most notable of Christ’s miracles and like a number of these it is important to see in them what is often referred to as Old Testament typology.

That means that Christ in his earthly ministry is re-enacting those of his Father which take place in the history of Israel in the Old Testament. So his walking on water reminds us of the Children of Israel crossing the Red Sea, which Moses divides on God’s instruction, and the Jordan too. His 40 day temptation recalls Israel’s wandering in the desert for 40 years and today’s event mirrors the provision of food in the form of manna during that period. These events demonstrate conspicuously the inseparable bond between the Son and the Father since in a sense the former duplicates the latter.

As we read the accounts of the Lord’s miracles in the four gospels we are drawn inevitably to the reaction of the crowds to the events but perhaps we should start with the staggering statement, “Power came forth from him and he healed them all”. No wonder that his ministry lasted only three years and that we are told that he was tired and retreated to a lonely place to rest and pray. “Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?” we read after he has been teaching the crowds. “The dumb man spoke and the crowds marvelled saying, ‘Never was anything seen like this in Israel’”. “What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?” the disciples marvelled. And when he raises up the son of the widow of Nain from his funeral bier, we read, “Fear seized them all and they glorified God saying, “God has visited his people”.

Apart from the gift of healing which is being bestowed in each case, there is the more important deeper issue of faith behind each event. “We never saw it like that” is the response in one case and there is no doubt that the Lord is leading those present into the deeper realms of faith where, as he says, “With God nothing is impossible”. To see something like what the crowds witnessed leads us to a crossroads of faith. We either go forward to understand that there is no limit to the realm of faith or we react with hostility and hatred like the Pharisees who see the man with the withered hand healed on the Sabbath in the synagogue and in their hatred immediately take counsel to destroy Jesus. And we see two other reactions to miracle in the gospels which perhaps are closer to us. Firstly, there is the reaction of the townspeople to the healing of the demoniac who lives among the tombs. They see the man who was violent, calm and in his right mind sitting at Jesus’ feet and they react negatively to what He has done. The power at play here is too strong for them and they want Jesus to move on and not interfere further in their lives. Secondly, there is the father of the epileptic whom the disciples cannot heal. The Lord teases him with the question, “Do you believe that I can do this?”. He responds honestly with the acknowledgement of his limited faith, “I believe. Help Thou my unbelief”. In other words, I want to believe since theoretically everything is possible with God but I am still at the level of ‘seeing is believing’ not at the level of “I am not worthy that you should come under the roof of my house but speak the word only and my servant shall be healed”. Elsewhere Christ utters the words to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen yet believe”. Another writer puts it like this, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” and he quotes a catalogue of saints who did not see but knew with certainty that there was one to come

to save mankind for whom they were prepared to give their lives before he arrived`.

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Our journey of faith is the same. We are to move steadfastly and irreversibly from one level of trust in God to another, so that the things unseen promised to us by God become more certain than what is seen in the cold rationality of impossibility and despair. This faith is not something which fails to take account of suffering in our lives.

It accepts the cross which is given to each of us as a necessary way to deeper dependence on God in humble obedience. The Lord likens this process to a small mustard seed which grows to be a very large bush.

Some years ago as chaplain at the local immigration detention centre in Kidlington I saw many different examples of people with faith. Many detainees were adamant that God was going to give them entry to the country even though they had no legal grounds to stay. Occasionally, I saw people who were exiles from their country and would have been imprisoned, even executed, if returned. They were pushed to the limit of their faith and simply placed their lives in the hands of God like a helpless but trusting servant. More than once I saw a miracle happen and somehow the door opened for them to walk through to safety. Great was their joy and thanks to God.

Today presents us with a miracle on a large scale. Five thousand are fed from five loaves and two fishes. On first appearances it seems difficult to believe but it is not really if we look at the miracle of the created order in its sophistication and complexity and how the world operates in nature, in the environment, and according to scientific laws which man is constantly discovering. Like the father who bewails the limits of his faith this miracle draws us more deeply into the unlimited area of trust in God and knowledge of his immense love for us, understanding as the Lord says, “Your Heavenly Father knows that you need all these things”.

“The righteous shall live by faith.” May God grant us all to experience the joy of deeper faith, which is summed up in that wonderful phrase in the Gospel, “.. and they glorified God saying, ‘We never saw it like this’”.

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