

Sermon - Being Filled with the Bread of Heaven - 25 Nov 2020

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“‘Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?’ (And this he said to prove him: for he himself knew what he would do.)’

May I speak in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

[*Pause*]

Two weeks ago Fr Mark discussed our tendency to focus on the means of exchange, not least money, rather than the fulfilling relationship of which the means of exchange is a part. In his sermon *this* Sunday, he reminded us that our passage contains the only miracle included in all four Gospels, the feeding of the five thousand.

One of the more basic questions this raises is, well, what exactly *is* a miracle? More to the point, how can our passage *this evening* shape our own understanding of the faith in which we dwell?

[*Pause*]

The philosopher David Hume famously defined a miracle as ‘a violation of the laws of nature.’ In this, he juxtaposed an understanding of the laws of nature which conformed to our regular observations, with the disruptive, transgressive and *imposed*

powers of God. What a miracle isn't, Hume argued, is that which happens 'in the common course of nature.'

Miracles are, by definition, impossible – because they do not conform to our uniform experience of the world.

This view invites us to think deeper about our own lived experience, what we would consider the common course of nature, as does Christ in his many probing questions throughout the Gospels. He provides his disciples, and us, opportunities to address how we understand the reality we inhabit; to ask ourselves what principles we hold in our hearts, that govern the way we see the world.

This is done perhaps most piercingly and intimately with his question 'Whom say ye that I am?' later in John's Gospel, as we discussed a few weeks ago. In today's passage, he asks Philip how they might feed the hungry crowd of five thousand people surrounding them.

And in this instance, Philip fails the test!

To our Lord's question he replies: 'Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may take a little.'

'*Feebly* again does Philip advance,' reflects Cyril of Alexandria, 'not to the power of Jesus to do all things, and that easily, but... looks at the means of money alone, not conceiving that the nature of the thing may be accomplished otherwise than by the common law.'

The disciple resorts to a narrow, incomplete answer. He doesn't yet fully grasp the nature of Jesus and his relationship with creation; or the consequences of this relationship for reality itself.

This is, of course, precisely *why* our Lord asks.

His question sets the perfect context for the miracle itself to take place, as a demonstration of Christ's nature, of his spiritual and manifest provision for his followers, of the nourishing character of his sacramental self-giving, for the bodies and souls of those who receive him.

[Pause]

What is needed, and what this and other miracles provide, is a *sign* of a deeper reality; the fuller reality in which we are invited to dwell as Christians. Hence John's Gospel describes these miracles *precisely as 'signs'*; they are not simply one-off demonstrations of divine power, but rooted illustrations of the true nature of things. Their purposes include bringing those who behold them, who see, smell, touch and taste their fruits, to active faith. And through faith to an ever greater understanding and relationship with God.

We have seen this in the preceding chapters of John's Gospel and our lectionary in this last part of Trinitytide: with the first sign at the wedding at Cana, with the healing of the lame man, and with the nobleman's son. All result in new and maturer belief, which itself seeks and is granted new understanding.

[Pause]

We are called to contemplate in our Christian lives, therefore, what this reality is, that is heralded and demonstrated by such a sign.

[Pause]

In the medieval cathedral of Monreale, in Sicily, is a golden mosaic depicting the life, death and resurrection of Christ. It depicts many miracles, including the feeding of the five thousand. Yet its story

begins not with the nativity but with the seven days of creation, in which Christ as the pre-Incarnate Word is shown at work, ordering the sun, moon and stars; walking in the Garden of Eden.

It is a wondrous, transformative depiction of the Christian reality, which is set out, of course, in the *Prologue* of John's Gospel.

What we are invited to see in the Gospel, as followers of Christ, is a different ordering of creation to that which we held to before, in our blinkered and incomplete ways – not the one which Hume implies, in which God subverts and twists the natural world for his own ends, transgressing upon natural laws, but one in which all things find their *root and their fruition*, in his creative love and presence. Christ is *no intruder* in creation, rather he is the Word through which creation was spoken into being, and he is that which unites the earthly and heavenly realms in his Incarnate person.

Beautifully, he is the same Jesus, to whose breast our Gospel's author clung at the Last Supper, as the awe-inspiring Alpha and Omega he beholds on the Lord's Day.

[Pause]

Our passage, therefore, illustrates Christ's fulfilling nature: He fulfils our hunger, both spiritual and bodily. In so doing, He signifies *and* demonstrates the purpose of creation, the dwelling together of God and humanity.

This miracle consequently places that most basic and necessary act, *eating*, in such a context.

As John Henry Newman reflected on this passage:

'From the beginning, the greatest rite of religion has been a feast...

...the partaking of God's bounties, in the way of nature, has been consecrated to a more immediate communion with God Himself. For instance, when Isaac was weaned, Abraham "made a great feast" ... At a feast, too, our Lord allowed the penitent woman to wash and anoint His feet, and pronounced her forgiveness; and at a feast, before His passion, He allowed Mary to anoint them with costly ointment, and to wipe them with her hair. Thus with our Lord, and with the Patriarchs, a feast was a *time of grace*.'

[*Big Pause*]

We are shown by this sign, the feeding of the five thousand, that our nourishment does not consist simply in the mundane means of exchange. More, we are shown that as Christians we inhabit a fuller, sacramental reality; a cosmos spoken into being through Christ the Word, which He fulfils in his self-giving to us and our consequent relationship with him.

This is the *start*, rather than the end, of our understanding; the grounding of *our* lived experience. As C.S. Lewis succinctly put it, 'I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen. Not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.'

[*Big Pause*]

On a practical note, God willing we will be able to hold public services once again next week. I pray that those at home, who have been unable to receive the Eucharistic Sacrament for some time, will once more be able to partake in this reception of Christ, and once more be nourished by his freely given body and blood.

We can do worse than dwelling on the hunger of the five thousand, than giving thanks for the feast they were given, even when such a thing seemed unlikely or distant to them.

And that is perhaps the most encouraging thing of all, the fact that Philip at first *did not see*.

This is deliberately drawn out by Christ's question. We certainly *can* fail to see, and yet we know that this failing on our part does *not* prevent the graceful, nourishing self-giving of Christ.

[Pause]

Our Lord's question to Philip is also posed to us, therefore: do we recognise what Philip at first did not? Have we profited from his example, and seek to grow in our relationship with God, as the Gospel of John ultimately intends for us?

'These are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.'

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*