

## On the Gospel

(John 6:1-15)

One of our favourite TV shows is 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire?' As you know, I'm sure, each contestant faces up to 15 questions, choosing between 4 possible answers each time. There are 3 life-lines to draw on; almost always the first to be used is 'Ask the Audience'. Questions on the Bible seem to cause contestants the greatest trouble! So, this morning, I would like to ask you, as the audience, for your help in answering one of them. It is this: Which miracle story in the life of Jesus is in all four gospels? Is it (A) the healing of blind Bartimaeus, (B) Jesus walking on water, (C) the feeding of the 5000, or (D) the Transfiguration? All vote now...!

It is indeed C. Mark and John give longer accounts, Matthew and Luke abbreviated ones. All differ in some of the details but agree on the main course of events.

Mark tells us that Jesus and his disciples needed a break from the crowds and the pressure, so they went by boat across the sea of Galilee to a deserted spot; Luke says it was in the region of Bethsaida (NE of the sea). But, as anyone who has been to Israel knows, the 'sea' is really only a large lake, some 8 miles across at the widest, and one can easily see across it. The crowd saw Jesus' boat depart, noted its destination, and followed by land! No rest for him at all! John tells us the people followed Jesus because of his healings. Mark says, when the crowd caught up with Jesus he had compassion on them for they were 'like sheep without a shepherd' and he taught them many things till it was late in the day; Matthew and Luke add he also cured the sick.

As a caring host Jesus wanted to feed the hungry crowd. In our Gospel account he asks Philip, a native of Bethsaida, where food can be obtained for them. Philip throws up his hands in horror and cries, "200 denarii (about 6 months wages for a labourer) would not be enough to provide them all with even a snack!" What to do? The disciples investigate, and Andrew finds a small boy with his picnic lunch: 5 small barley rolls and 2 sardines (or their equivalent), which he offers to Jesus. People hold their breath!

Jesus takes the small offering, blesses it, breaks it and gives the pieces to the disciples to distribute to the seated crowds. The more the pieces are broken, the more they become! What mysterious wonder is here?? When all the people have received and indeed are FULL, our narrative says, Jesus tells the disciple to gather up the fragments, and they filled twelve baskets. The basket referred to, in Greek *kophinos*, was according to William Barclay, bottle-shaped and 'no Jew ever travelled without (one)'. So, why 12 baskets full? To provide food for each of the disciples who had served the meal!

Why was this particular miracle so important that it is the only one recorded in all four gospels? Jn. 6:14 tells us: 'When the people saw the sign Jesus had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world."' Which prophet? The one Moses had spoken of when he said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him' (Deut. 18:15). Moses had provided mysterious manna in the wilderness to feed the hungry Israelites, and now Jesus had provided miraculous bread to feed a hungry crowd! He must indeed be that Prophet, a New Moses, and so the people wanted to come and force Jesus to be their king (Jn. 6:15) - but withdrew from them. It was not his way.

If the principal purpose of this miracle is to tell us about Jesus himself, are there other lessons in it for us? There are:

- In a sense the story can be seen as a sort of prototype of the Eucharist, where Sunday by Sunday the priest takes bread, blesses it, breaks and distributes it. We should be surprised if it multiplied, but it does feed a company of people spiritually.
- From John's account of the story Barclay poses a challenging question: when faced with difficulties in life, do we react like Philip by throwing up our hands in despair and crying, "The situation is hopeless, nothing can be done"? Or are we like Andrew who said in effect, "I'll see what I can do and I'll trust Jesus to do the rest."
- As others have observed, Jesus can use our small offerings in remarkable ways. One such example is that of Chrissie Chapman, related in her book *The Night the Angels Came*. She came from Cheshire, her mother was a cook, her father a motor mechanic. From a teenager she wanted to be a midwife. She was not, she says, an exceptionally bright child but was able to train as an SRN and a midwife. Later in a drunken misadventure in France she nearly died, but at a hospital a doctor talked to her about Jesus and, she says, 'As I listened I was led into the open arms of God where I found the love and acceptance I had craved all my life.' Several health issues remained and then an amazing healing miracle. In 1990 she moved to Burundi and, despite the civil war that began there 3 years later, she opened a maternity clinic, later an orphanage, and then a school. She adopted 3 Burundian girls and is still there.
- Let Barclay have the final word. As Andrew brought a boy to Jesus and a miracle resulted, when we as a Christian parent or a Sunday School teacher bring a child to Christ, we never know what possibilities we are releasing through their lives.

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