

Miracles of Jesus - 2

Jesus Feeds Five Thousand

When they tell you someone you love has died, your heart contracts in pain. You see at once the dear familiar face of the one who has gone, and the memories rush swiftly backwards through the years. You know that nothing in your life will ever be the same again.

When they told Jesus that his cousin, John the Baptist, had been brutally killed in prison, he would feel an extra pang of fear. He would know that before long it would be his turn to die, alone before the fury of wicked men. Jesus had always respected John, and John's death marked a turning point in his mission. John's work as the Lord's messenger was complete. Now Jesus was on his own, committed to finishing the task that John had predicted: Jesus was to give his life as the Lamb of God for the sins of mankind.

For months, every day had been packed with action: endless queues of ill people hoping to be cured; disciples needing warning and instruction; and always the Jewish rulers to be considered, waiting in case he should let slip a treasonable phrase they could use in evidence against him. Jesus was tired. The disciples were tired. He desperately wanted a break, a breathing space to sit quietly and think, to mourn for his lost friend. He said to his disciples:

"Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while." For there were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat (Mark 6:31).



Seeking Solitude

They set off across the Sea of Galilee in their fishing boat, heading towards the deserted northern shore. With the wind in the hollow sail, white water creaming along the planking, and the hot sun baking brown, outstretched limbs, they could relax and enjoy a rare peace. It took some time to reach the coast. Perhaps they deliberately dallied on their way, savouring their freedom. When at last, the boat turned to land, the sun was high in the sky. They were looking forward to a stroll on the beach, perhaps a quiet picnic in the shade.

But as the beach came into view, the sharper eyed disciples were puzzled and disturbed to see tiny heads and bright fluttering cloaks where they had expected nothing but smooth green turf, fresh from the rains. With growing dismay, they realised at last they were not going to be alone.

What had happened was that the morning crowds, gathering as usual to greet the master at Capernaum, had discovered he had left before them. The quicker witted ones had noticed

the direction the tiny sail was taking over the lake, and read correctly the intention of Jesus to spend the day at Bethsaida. Not to be cheated of his company, they had set off overland on the long trek round the coast, and had arrived before him.

The multitudes saw them departing, and many knew him and ran there on foot from all the cities. They arrived before them and came together to him (v33).

With cheerful grins, they were all ready to drag the boat up the beach and help Jesus and the disciples to disembark.



A Graceful Response

We can imagine the apostles with tight, angry lips and dark, pained eyes as they saw their brief rest about to be rudely cancelled. They would long to get back into the boat and sail away again. Nobody would want to escape more than Jesus himself. All his human fibres would cry out for a rest. He deserved a break. He could easily justify a getaway, if not for himself, then at least for the sake of the apostles. The challenge of the wilderness temptations came back again, flashing across his weary mind as it does for each of us every day. “Look after

number one” it said. “Go on, spoil yourself! Have a good time while you can.”

Once more the mighty Saviour rose to his feet, and rebuked the human thinking that would deflect him from his duty. Once more, that all-consuming love that drove him opened his arms to respond to their cries for help.

He received them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who had need of healing (Luke 9:11).

Jesus would never let them down. They had made such an effort to be with him, he would forget his own tiredness, and take them to his care like the shepherd with his lambs. And so, the apostles found themselves back at their customary task of marshalling the crowds and waiting upon the Master.

Practical Matters

When the day began to wear away (v12), the apostles were irritable, worn out and ready to go home. All twelve descended on Jesus. “Send the multitude away, that they may go into the surrounding towns and country, and lodge and get provisions; for we are in a deserted place here.”

With a hint of a rebuke, Jesus brought them back to their duty. It was tough, being an apostle, and they were only beginning to learn the depths of self-sacrifice he would show them. “*You give them something to eat*” he continued. They did a quick sum. Five thousand hungry men, plus women and children, say eight thousand people in all. it would

cost them over six months' salary! They just did not have that sort of money. But Jesus directed them:

He said to them, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." And when they found out they said, "Five, and two fish" (Mark 6:38).

It was late in the day, and most people had already finished what they had brought from home. They found a lad with five loaves and two fishes – perhaps he had been sent from the nearest village to find the members of his own family. At any rate, he gladly volunteered what he had, to give to Jesus.



The Miracle

The next few minutes are etched indelibly into all four gospel records. No-one who saw it could ever forget. Tidily, Jesus organised the people into manageable groups, seated on the grass. Looking up to heaven, so that even those too far away to hear would see where the bread had come from, he gave thanks. How many of us,

today, still follow his example? *"Give us this day our daily bread"* we may pray. But do we say, *"thank you"* when it comes? An open example, even in this small way, can show our faith in God.

When he had finished, he broke the bread and fish in his hands, and gave the pieces to the disciples. Patiently, they trotted to and fro, as more and more came from his lap, until every man, woman and child had eaten all they could. By this time, it was nearly dark, but still he had not finished.

When they were filled, he said to his disciples, "Gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing is lost" (John 6:12).

Backs bent, the disciples stuffed the crusts into baskets until each of them had as much as he could carry. It was a stupendous miracle. No wonder John records that the people who stayed behind wanted to take Jesus by force and make him king.

Then those men, when they had seen the sign that Jesus did, said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world." Therefore when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he departed again to the mountain by himself alone (v14–15).

There is something compelling about those twelve baskets of crusts. They emphasise the super-abundance of the provision, so that even the leftovers weighed more than the original loaves. In response to prayer, God had been more than generous. They also confirm, in a very positive way, the authenticity of the miracle. The whole story hangs together: the remote location, the late hour, the hunger of the

crowds, and then those baskets of leftovers, noted by all four of the Gospel writers, including the two who were actually present at the event and so were first-hand witnesses.

A Far-Reaching Meaning

This brings us to the last, and perhaps the greatest significance of the feeding of the multitude. Like the apostles, we can have every confidence, today, that if we seek first His Kingdom, God will provide for us. Jesus commanded specifically:

Do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'... For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you (Matthew 6:31, 33).

But there was a deeper meaning to the shared, divided bread, and the fragments that must not be lost, which we must understand. It became apparent the following day, when the crowds came back, hoping for more free bread. Jesus deliberately set them thinking:

I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this



bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world (John 6:51).

Like the loaves of bread, he was to be 'broken' on the cross. His all-consuming love for us all, that shaming self-sacrifice, would drive him to suffer a death he did not deserve, so that he might set free his followers from the power of eternal death. Jesus said:

I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst... This is the will of the Father who sent me, that of all He has given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And this is the will of Him who sent me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day (v35, 39-40).

But to share in that feast, we must take Jesus unreservedly into our hearts and lives. We must make ourselves one with him, first by faith and baptism into his name, and then by daily discipleship, with the same love and self-sacrifice that he himself taught.

That great news of God's Kingdom, the promise of living for ever, has been shared with us through the writings of the apostles, like the pieces of bread they carried to the crowds. It is the good news of Jesus, the bread from heaven, that sends us home rejoicing, each praising him as king. And these miracles he worked, attested by honest witnesses, are the proof he really was and is the Son of God.

David M Pearce