

## THE GREATEST MIRACLE?

Exodus 16:1–8, John 6

How many of the miracles of Jesus are recorded in all four of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John? The answer is only one, the feeding of the five thousand. What is it that is so special about this miracle? Would we possibly describe it as the greatest of Christ's miracles? Let me remind you of

### 1. The scale of the miracle

Think of the number of people who were fed. John tells us in verse 10 that there were about five thousand men. Matthew adds the observation that there were five thousand men, besides women and children.

Contrasting with the size of the crowds the scale of the miracle can be measured by the size of the resources. The crowds were huge, well over five thousand people. The resources were tiny, a little boy's lunch, or probably just what was left of it: five bread rolls and a couple of small fish. Andrew summed up the contrast nicely in verse 9. 'How far will they go among so many?'

Perhaps the scale of the miracle can also be measured by the alternative scenario. What if? What if Jesus had not been able to supply their need? The disciples were certainly aware of the problem. It was getting late. It was rather an isolated place. They would need time to go into the nearest villages. What must they have thought when Jesus said, 'Tell them all to sit down. You feed them.'

A further indicator of the scale of the miracle is the fact that when everyone had been fed and was satisfied there was enough left over to fill twelve baskets, the exact number of the disciples. Not thirteen baskets, notice. Nothing to do with unlucky numbers. But remember Jesus' words in John 4:32, 'I have food to eat that you know nothing about.' Perhaps it was to teach the disciples that he had inner resources that Jesus didn't ask for a basket for himself. Perhaps it was to teach them to share what they had with him, to make an offering, if you like. At all events, there was enough and to spare.

The scale of the miracle is truly staggering. Another feature of the miracle is that it was

### 2. An echo of the past

Earlier we read from Exodus chapter 16, God's provision of manna for his people in the desert. It is clear from Jesus' explanation of the miracle that this event was in his mind.

This is how he interpreted the miracle to the people. John chapter 6 verses 48 to 51. 'I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever.'

What are the features of God's provision of manna in Exodus chapter 16?

- It was given just when they needed it most. They were in the desert. It was a real need. The Bible reminds us of the hunger of the soul, a far deeper need than physical hunger. Jesus has been given to meet that need, to satisfy our hunger for God, for truth, for righteousness, for peace. We live in a prosperous area of the world where we have all we need materially. But there is a dimension of our lives that is not satisfied by material things. You can feel 'in the desert' emotionally, spiritually: a desert of loneliness, disappointment, guilt, fear, frustration. For these needs God has given us Jesus. God's provision was given just when they needed it most.
- It was given just where they expected it least. Not from Egypt, not from anywhere on earth, but from heaven. It was supernatural. It was miraculous. It wasn't the result of human effort but God's gift. Jesus is given to us as our Saviour but in a way we least expect it. We think we need to earn God's favour, to work for our salvation, but we can

only experience God's peace and forgiveness when we stop trying and start trusting. Jesus is the bread that came from heaven.

Just when they needed it most: just where they expected it least.

- The third lesson from Exodus 16 is that God's provision was given just as it suited them best. It was a daily provision, in the morning. Verse 21: 'Each morning everyone gathered as much as he needed.' Verse 18 tells us 'when they measured it ... he who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little'. They all had different needs but it was exactly right for each of them. It sustained them right up to the border of Canaan. Verse 35: 'The Israelites ate manna for forty years, until they came to a land that was settled; they ate manna until they reached the border of Canaan.'

This morning as we gather in God's presence we're all different. We all have needs and they are all different. But God's provision in Jesus is exactly right for each of our needs.

If the feeding of the five thousand was an echo of the past, it was also

### 3. A pointer to the future

It's not quite so clear in John's Gospel but it's very clear in the other three. Jesus took the bread. He looked up to heaven and gave thanks. He broke the bread and gave it. The language echoes the actions of Jesus at the last supper, which we commemorate in communion. John has his own way of underlining this lesson. In verses 51–54. Jesus said:

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

What did Jesus mean by eating his flesh and drinking his blood? Did he mean that the bread and wine of communion in some way become literally his body and blood? That is what the Roman Catholic church teaches. When we look at the context of John chapter 6 a different meaning emerges.

Verses 28 to 30: '[The crowd] asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." they asked him, "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?"'

Verses 35 and 36: 'Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe."'

Verse 40: "'For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.'"

Verse 47: "'I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life.'"

What does it mean to feed on the Lord Jesus? It means to believe in him. What does it mean to believe in him? It means to rely on him for your spiritual needs in the same way that you rely on food for your physical needs.

If I said to you, 'How do you intend to stay alive between now and next Sunday?' you might say, 'I'm going to have three or four good meals a day and quite possibly some snacks in between.' If I met you next Sunday and said, 'How many meals have you had since last week?' and you said, 'Well, actually, none,' I would be amazed.

Yet people say, 'I'm living by faith in Jesus,' and if I asked, 'How many times have you prayed and read your Bible? How far have you actively involved Jesus in your life?' the

answer would be, 'Not very much.' That's not living by faith. That's spiritual starvation.

#### **4. An interesting sequel**

The feeding of the five thousand was a wonderful miracle on a fantastic scale with deep lessons to teach us. But for all the magnitude of it there is one point of interest that we should not overlook.

Last week we looked at Christ's first miracle: changing water into wine. On this occasion Jesus multiplied loaves and fish and said, 'I am the bread of life.' The wedding at Cana was a special occasion and he turned water into wine. But out in that lonely country spot Jesus didn't turn bread into cake. Life isn't all celebration and extravagance. There's something very down to earth about bread. Bread is such a basic necessity. I've seen white bread, brown bread, malted bread, fruit bread, sliced bread, naan bread, wholemeal bread, slimmers' bread, but Jesus offers living bread, the bread of life, bread that has come down from heaven.

Jesus is not just for Christmas and Easter, for births, marriages and deaths. He is there for us as our daily bread, feeding our souls, sustaining us in our needs, building us up in faith, love and hope.

#### **5. An unexpected outcome**

It isn't a real issue, but I think a case could be put forward that this was Christ's greatest miracle: the scale of it, its echo of the past, its anticipation of the future, its application to practical, every-day life.

What is amazing is the reaction to it. Initially, the reaction was enthusiastic. Verses 14 and 15: 'After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.'

But by the end of the chapter a very different picture emerges. The crowd were full of questions. 'Rabbi, when did you get here? ... What must we do to do the works God requires? ... What miraculous sign do you do that we may see it and believe you? What can you do?' And then as Jesus continued to teach them the questions became less polite. 'Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, "I came down from heaven"?''

Verse 52: 'Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?"' Verse 60: 'Many of his disciples said, "This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?"' The sequel is verse 66. 'From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.'

Is that not surprising? The result of the greatest miracle was the greatest turning away. From that time *many* turned back and no longer followed him. Within this miracle there is the call to total commitment, total dependence, total loyalty.

After the many had gone and just the few remained Jesus said to the Twelve (verse 67), 'Do you want to leave too?' Simon Peter answered him (verses 68 and 69), 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'

What is your response to the Lord today? Will you turn away or will you stay?