

Today's gospel reading is the feeding of the five thousand. There are some who dismiss the recorded miracles of Jesus – which the gospels actually call 'works of power' or 'signs' – because they find them too incredible, too difficult to believe. They 'explain away' the walking on the water – for example – by saying the tide went out; this displays not only a poor knowledge of oceanography but also a spectacular lack of imagination.

I agree with C.S. Lewis, who said that the miracles make it *easier* to believe in Jesus, not harder; after all, what would we think of a man whom people looked upon as the Prophet who was to come into the world, the Messiah, the Son of God, even – but could do absolutely nothing to save a dying child? Lewis also said that the miracles don't suspend the laws of nature, they just teach us how little we know about them.

This is the literal, concrete, historical aspect of all Jesus' 'works of power' – yes, two thousand years ago, it happened: Jesus miraculously fed great numbers of people, cured the sick, restored sight to the blind and raised the dead. *However*, it is also, probably the least important aspect: it is finite and temporal, like everything else this world, but every thought, word and deed of Jesus has an infinite and eternal meaning. It has a higher resonance, a deeper symbolism and a greater power than the merely concrete, important though the concrete is.

For example: Jesus was born a long time ago in a stable in Bethlehem, an insignificant town in an unimportant Middle-

Eastern land. *However*, as Meister Eckhart and Angelus Silesius and all the great Christian mystics taught, the infinite and eternal meaning of that event is the birth of Christ in the soul. Silesius said:

“Christ could be born a thousand times in Bethlehem — but all in vain until He is born in me.”

Our soul must give birth to Christ as surely as Mary did. Thomas Aquinas, referring to this, said: “To God, all souls are feminine.”

It is just the same with every outward deed of Jesus Christ: deeds that are finite and temporal – in our world of space and time – with an infinite and eternal meaning. This meaning is very accessible in some cases – like the cure of the man born blind, for example – but in other cases not.

In today’s gospel, the infinite and eternal meaning of the feeding of the five thousand is Christ giving himself as our spiritual food in the Eucharist. Hans Urs von Balthasar, one of the Church’s great modern theologians, says that here the giving and receiving becomes mutual. The one who gives so generously that there is an abundance left over (the gospel says twelve basketsful) himself goes hungry until our being participates in the mystery of his being in the Eucharist. It is a mutual nourishing.

But there is more, perhaps. The gospels are full of great archetypal themes: an ‘archetypal theme’ is one that has been there since the beginning of humanity, in our dreams, our fantasies, our lived experiences, in the collective dark earth

from which the inward life of every living thing – including each of us – grows and blossoms. An archetypal theme is one which has never *not* been around: hubris and nemesis is one; others include sacrifice, mercy and exile; another is being fed by the divine – by the god or gods. The Old Testament is full of examples: God feeding the Israelites with manna in the desert; Elijah blessing the widow and her son with an abundance of corn and oil; in the Book of Kings the prophet Elisha feeds a hundred men with a small amount of bread and there is plenty left over; all of this is recapitulated in the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. All four evangelists have this account and, in addition, Matthew and Mark have a feeding of four thousand story. As I said at the beginning, I'm quite sure this happened in an historical time and place and manifested the sign-giving power of Jesus; *however*, I'm also sure that it is a living symbol of our being fed by the Lord every day we live: supremely in the Eucharist, of course, but also in the apparently ordinary, even humdrum circumstances of our daily lives. It is *always* in what we see as nothing special, nothing remarkable, uninteresting, that the truly extraordinary shows itself. This is why Jesus was born in a stable amid the animals and not in a 5-star hotel surrounded by the glitterati.

The Lord will feed us with patience in times of frustration and annoyance; he will pour us the wine of compassion when people need a listening ear or a helping hand; he will nourish us with the bread of kindness to others even when we are in

need of kindness ourselves; he will sit us down at table and himself serve us with understanding, acceptance, fellowship and, ultimately, love. This is – also ultimately – what the feeding of the five thousand means. All we have to do is hold out our hands and say: “Please Lord, can I have some more?”