

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. They would say that the real miracle that Jesus worked in today's gospel is getting people to share with one another – which they otherwise wouldn't have done.

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 or even helpful way at looking at these things: it is finite and temporal, like everything else this world; every miracle had a beginning and an end and took place in time. However, because Jesus was who he was, every thought of his, every

word and deed, has a significance and a meaning that is *not* literal, not concrete or historical, but infinite and eternal. Everything he did and said carried a deeper and richer symbolism that carries ‘there and then’ up into a timeless ‘now’. It has a higher purpose 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. That’s the solid historical fact of it. Yet 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 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 timeless meaning. This meaning is very accessible in some cases and we can understand it readily – like the cure of the man born blind, for example – but in other cases it is more subtle. 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 (pride going before a fall); others include sacrifice, mercy and the beast disguised as a human; they crop up in myths, stories, legends and folk tales all over the world. Stephen Spielberg knows how to pluck the strings of these archetypal themes, which is why many of his films have such power: the monster from deep down in the dark (*Jaws*), exile (*E.T.*), an almost religious experience of the totally 'other' (*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*).

Another of these themes is divine food: being fed by the divine. The Old Testament is full of examples of this: God feeding the Israelites with manna in the desert; Elijah blessing the widow and her son with an abundance of corn and oil; in today's first reading from the Second Book of Kings, the prophet Elisha feeds a hundred men with a small

amount of bread and there is plenty left over. And in the lovely psalm 23 it says:

“You have prepared a banquet for me in the sight of my foes”

Now all of this – all of it – is recapitulated in the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand. Each of the four evangelists have an account of it and, in addition, Matthew and Mark also have a story about the feeding of four thousand people. As I said earlier, 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. It is not a matter of poverty – after all, the Holy Family could certainly *afford* to stay at the local inn, but there just wasn’t enough room. It has, absolutely, everything to do with the humility of God, with his modesty, his gentle unobtrusiveness. It might perhaps seem strange to us to talk about God’s ‘humility’, but it was there when the cosmos first broke into being; Simone Weil said that God’s greatest act of self-abasement was creation, when he allowed something other than himself to exist. One contemporary theologian has even written:

“One of the most surprising discoveries in my own study of the doctrine and experience of the Spirit in the New Testament is what I can only call the shyness of the Spirit ... What I mean here is not the shyness of timidity (cf. 2 Tim. 1:7) but the shyness of deference, the shyness of attention to another rather than oneself; it is not the shyness (which we often experience) of self-centeredness, but the shyness of *other*-centeredness. It is, in short, the shyness of love.”

The Lord will feed us with patience in times of frustration and annoyance; he will pour out for 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 what the feeding of the five thousand is about. The layers of its full meaning are many, some of them beyond our present understanding.