

Sermon for 28th July 2024, Year B, Proper 12

Preached at St Serf Shettleston

John 6:1-21

Sermon

Last week, our gospel reading from Mark had verses from immediately before and after the feeding of the five thousand, but entirely left out the event itself, and now we see why! Today we're offered the famous miracle story as told in John's gospel, and we even get Jesus walking on the water as a bonus!

As usual with miracle stories in the gospels, we're invited to wonder at them and ponder why they might have happened, and why they were included in the bible, and of course whether we still believe in such miracles.

In Jesus' day, there never seems to have been any question that the miracles were indeed miracles. After all, part of the problem for the authorities was that the people were following Jesus in big crowds, hoping to see miracles or perhaps even benefit from them. And the Pharisees never accused Jesus of being a charlatan - rather they objected to his criticism of them, and his tendency to give love and compassion far more importance than their religious rules.

But modern people often find miracles to be a stumbling block to faith and many would prefer that the gospel writers had focused instead on Jesus's teachings and wisdom, his ability to include and inspire communities of outsiders, and his compassion for the poor and sick, rather than the miracles that sometimes make us doubt everything else.

This has led to some commentators doing their best to find alternative non-miraculous ways to explain some of the events reported in the gospels. It's been said, for example, that the feeding of the five thousand is not so much a miraculous duplication of food, but rather the generosity of a young boy shaming

the large crowd of adults into sharing their own supplies that they'd hidden away for their own selfish use.

And those with a bit of biblical Greek knowledge can wave away the miracle of Jesus walking on water by pointing out that the word 'epi' which is translated 'on' can also mean 'by'. So instead of Jesus walking on the lake, he is walking 'by' the lake, and the disciples are simply confused by the rough water, since immediately they try to bring him into the boat, they realise they've already arrived at the shore.

While this may make it easier for the modern mind to accept these events as true historical happenings, I do think this approach somewhat dulls our ability to experience the extraordinary in the midst of our ordinary lives, and it also rather defeats the point the Gospel is trying to make.

When the feeding of the five thousand becomes a moral tale about how a young boy's generosity shames the adults into sharing with each other - something they already knew to be the right thing to do - then Christianity is turned into a religion of public shaming and guilt-trips to enforce proper behaviour. And for many people that is precisely what Christianity is, and why so many say things like "I can be a Christian without going to church". They fear they will be judged and criticised and possibly even bullied into conformity if they so much as step into a church building, and sadly, that does indeed quite often happen.

If on the other hand, we suspend disbelief for a moment and accept the miracles at face value, then there are other very different messages on display. The feeding of the five thousand, for example, is more likely to be showing us that God's abundance far exceeds our needs or expectations, or even what we have faith to hope for.

Generally speaking, we tend to be like Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, who having made some practical progress by locating the boy with the loaves and

fishes, declares sadly, “But what are they among so many?” We feel the same when we look around at the world or even our own neighbourhood and then at our meagre resources. What is the point of even trying to fix the world’s problems, when we have so little?

God’s answer is apparently not to guilt-trip us into doing more and giving more, but to provide an abundance to the humble and meek that the rich and powerful could only dream of. And not only that but if anyone here feels that they themselves might be a bit of a ‘leftover’ in life, we learn that in God’s economy the leftovers are neither insignificant nor abandoned but gathered together and celebrated.

This interpretation explains why our gospel reading is paired with two others with a similar message of superabundant divine provision. The Old Testament reading from the book of Kings has Elisha the prophet directing that a gift of twenty loaves should be set before a mere hundred people, and his servant is already anxious that it’s not enough. How much more are the disciples worried when they have but five loaves and two fish to feed many thousands? But in both cases, there is not only enough, but plenty of leftovers. With God, there is always far more than we need. And the letter to the Ephesians states all this explicitly: “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine...”

This, I think, is the real message of these miracles: a demonstration that God’s love not only meets our needs but far exceeds anything we could ask for. I’m sure that receiving such abundance would indeed inspire us to share what little we have, but how much more generous and open-hearted are we when we’re inspired by the superabundant love shown to us, rather than bullied into conformity and obedience by shame and guilt.

This is why I've always felt there are two main versions of the Christian religion. One is based on fear - fear of not being good enough, of being criticised and excluded, of failing to be righteous enough for heaven. The other is rooted in a realisation and experience of God's unconditional, unexpected, undeserved love, that gives far more than we could ever imagine. The former, sadly, often leads to a puritanical people, anxious about any infraction, whether their own or more likely someone else's, that might lead to their exclusion from the community or indeed send them to hell. In contrast, the latter version leads to an inexpressible joy, absence of worry or anxiety, an unshakeable sense of belonging in God's family, and a desire to share God's love with others, safe in the knowledge that it will never run out or fade away.

But wait, there's a little more, I think, to these miracles than even the superabundance of God's provision. There's a message here as well about God's refusal to be controlled or directed by humanity, as if divine abundance was ours to command or manipulate. The several thousand who've enjoyed this feast with Jesus want to make him king by force, but he refuses to let them turn him into a tool for producing miraculous food on demand and he escapes to the mountain by himself, leaving the disciples to travel ahead by boat. Later he meets them near the lakeshore on the other side, and whether or not he's literally walked across the water, he resists the disciples' desire to take control by bringing him into the boat, as if Jesus were the one who needed their help.

The message here is that God is not ours to command. The gifts God offers always exceed our needs, but we have to let them be gifts. Nowhere in the bible does a sense of entitlement ever win God's favour. Fortunately, anyone who has ever experienced God's love will know in their innermost being that they can never deserve what they have been given, much like a child can never earn the love and gifts their parents give them. But isn't that the point of a freely given gift? We didn't earn or deserve God's love, so none of us can boast, but God

loves us nonetheless, and there's surely nothing more joyous and delightful than that! All we need to do is say thank you, and leap happily into his arms.