

Trinity 8

In these Sundays after Trinity we contemplate the core of Jesus' life on earth, his teaching ministry, so we've been hearing about the parables for a couple of weeks. In talking about those I've more than once mentioned the Jewish tradition of acted or enacted parables (of which this sacrament is the supreme example for us). This morning we move on to Jesus' miracles, which are also parables, and the series continues for the next two Sundays. If you want to understand this element of the Gospels, there is no better place to look than Fr Jeffrey John's book, *The Meaning in the Miracles*.

We lazily refer to 'the miracles' of Jesus as an undifferentiated class of supernatural actions which we then try either to explain or explain away. But they are at the core of his project in the gospels, not as random individual instances of wonder-working, but as demonstrations of God's relationship with us. They *are* acted parables, so we need to tease out the meaning rather than gawp at them as a magic act in a variety show.

There are two modern responses to these miracles: either they are treated literally as evidence, a demonstration of divine power, or they are treated reductively, diminishing the miraculous element to something readily grasped in this-worldly terms. So today's story would be either just another proof that God can do what he likes or taken to suggest that Jesus' example of sharing food contagiously spread to the whole group, the real miracle being that we all discover the joy of caring and sharing. These responses assume that the only interesting thing about the miracles is what did or did not happen. If you ask the wrong question you will inevitably get the wrong answer: as always in the Gospels the question is, what do they *mean*? S John always refers to these actions as *signs*, rather than miracles; there's a clue there.

S Augustine was already complaining 1600 years ago that we get stuck on the 'wonder' element and on speculation about what happened. He wrote

Let us ask the miracles themselves what they tell us about Christ, for they have a tongue of their own, if it can only be understood. Because Christ is the Word of God, all the acts of the Word become words to us. The miracle which we admire on the outside also has something inside which must be understood. If we see a piece of beautiful handwriting, we are not satisfied simply to note that the letters are formed, evenly, equally and elegantly: we also want to know the meaning the letters convey. In the same way a miracle is not like a picture, something merely to look at and admire, and to be left at that. It is much more like a piece of writing which we must learn to read and understand.

[*On the Gospel of John 24.2*]

A reader with even a sketchy knowledge of the Old Testament is likely to remember that Moses did something similar to what we've just heard with the manna in the desert; closer examination reveals more detailed points of comparison. Like Moses, Jesus crosses the water into the desert, sits the people down in companies and feeds them with miraculous bread from heaven in such abundance that there are basketsful

left over. Though the OT story is less well-known, Jesus' actions also recall Elisha: in 2 Kings 4 Elisha takes an army of men into the desert and feeds them miraculously with a few loaves. In recapitulating Moses Jesus fulfils the Law; in recapitulating Elisha he fulfils the Prophets. Differently but harmoniously his appearance with Moses and *Elijah* on Thursday's Feast of the Transfiguration prophesies in advance of the Passion that Jesus is truly the one whom the Law and the Prophets foretold.

There's more: this feeding of the five thousand, with 12 baskets of leftovers, is followed by an almost identical miracle, where four thousand are fed (with seven baskets of scraps). The numbers are emphasised (in Mark's telling, by Jesus himself). In the first miracle they point to a Jewish context (five books of the Law, twelve tribes), in the second to the gentiles (the four corners of the earth; seven, the number of completeness, the whole creation). Here is the two-stage proclamation to 'the Jew first and also to the Greek'.

Bread, in Jewish thought, symbolises the word of God, from Deuteronomy 8's explanation of the manna, 'you shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.' (tellingly quoted by Jesus when he is tempted). And the words and actions of Jesus over the bread here are identical to those at the Last Supper, the new Christian Passover. *Mark* adds here that Jesus took pity on the hungry crowd, who he saw as 'like sheep without a shepherd', the words used in the appointment of Joshua by Moses [Numbers 27.17]: Joshua and Jesus are the same name. Jesus not only fulfils Moses, Elisha and Joshua but also supersedes them: Jesus acts here in the person of God himself. He supplies the feast which Isaiah prophesies in our first reading and elsewhere (one of the rabbis wrote that as the first redeemer, Moses fed his people from the bread in the desert, so would the last, the Messiah, eternally). When John reports the feeding of the five thousand (explicitly reported at the time of Passover) it leads directly to Jesus' 'Bread of Life' discourse, adapting the Jewish idea of the manna as God's word to John's introduction of Jesus as the Word made flesh.

The rabbis taught by what they called *haggadah*, 'narrative' in which scriptural texts are used by the writer to interpret what is reported, weaving together threads of prophecy-fulfilment, symbolism, typology, allegory and numerology. The reported event reapplies the truths, hopes, patterns and meanings of the scriptural past to the present. So the key to unlocking the meaning will always be found in the Old Testament stories which underlie the telling.

The Mass gathers up all the strands of allusion that the miracle weaves together: it is the present self-manifestation and self-giving of the one to whom the Law and the Prophets bore witness. In it Jesus himself still takes, blesses, breaks and gives the bread for his people. *Here* is the Christian Passover, eternally celebrating and making present the redemption won for us in Christ. As the Passover Manna came to be understood by the Jews as a symbol of the Word of God in the Law, or as God's own Wisdom in dwelling in us, so in the Eucharist we receive Christ, the eternal Word of

God, both in Scripture and in the sacrament (as in the meeting on the road to Emmaus). Like Passover the Eucharist is the Church's family meal, sustaining us through the 'desert' of earthly life. It is for all peoples and prefigures, but also makes present, the banquet of heaven, in which we have a foretaste in Holy Communion. It is the same continuing miracle through which the life of God himself is imparted to us, still superabundant and unfailing, in all times and in all places.

Next week: the Calming of the Storm!