

The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand was so central to the preaching of the early church that it appears in all four Gospels. This guarantees immediately that its authenticity is dismissed by most modern theologians – because they have an absolute prejudice against anything miraculous. I've got news for these modern types: the people of Jesus' time had a prejudice against miracles too. So many times the Gospel writers, and even Jesus himself, upbraided their contemporaries for unbelief and hardness of heart. I really don't know where the modern idea comes from – that, just because they lived a couple of thousand years ago, ordinary men and women in the street would believe any old guff. They didn't. And for good reason. They inhabited the same natural world that we inhabit, and so they knew very well that, as a general rule dead men are not raised and you can't get a quart out of a pint glass.

The attitude of the modern biblical scholar Professor William Barclay is typical. He says that, by his generosity, the little boy who had the five loaves and two fishes taught the crowd of five thousand to share. But there's nothing newsworthy, let alone Gospel-worthy, about a moral cliché like that. Are we really being expected to believe that, instead of the miracle, there was a local outbreak of socialism eighteen hundred years before its time? But that is not how the Gospel writers described it. And it was not the experience of the crowd. They thought the feeding of the five thousand was the miraculous work of *that prophet that should come into the world*.

If you don't mind, I want to dwell on the logic of this modern scepticism for a minute: because it is so pervasive, so destructive and so stupid. The Christian writer C.S. Lewis wrote an essay called *Fern Seeds and Elephants* in which he described modern biblical critics as men who were so microscopically punctilious that they could see every detail of the minute fern seed, but failed to notice an elephant at twenty paces. Lewis says:

*Quite incredible that we should have had to wait nearly 2000 years to be told by a theologian called Dr Alec Vidler that what the church has always regarded as a miracle was, in fact a parable.*

And he adds:

*Modern critics claim that the real behaviour and purpose and teaching of Christ came very rapidly to be misunderstood and misrepresented by his followers and has now been recovered or exhumed only by modern scholars. But the idea that any man or writer should be opaque to those who lived in the same culture, spoke the same language and shared the same habitual imagery and unconscious assumptions, and yet be transparent to those who have none of these advantages is preposterous...*

Prejudice aside then, let us take a close look at today's Gospel. Jesus and his disciples cross the Sea of Galilee in a boat and come to Bethsaida on the north east coast. Nowadays we should say this place is on the edge of the Golan Heights. Its ancient name means *fish house* and it was a small town enlarged and beautified – or rather tarted-up – by Philip the Tetrach who renamed it Bethsaida Julias, after the glamorous but dissolute daughter of Emperor Augustus. It was all cheap imitation Greek architecture.

The crowd had been attracted by Jesus' teaching and healing and so they ran around the coastline, ahead of the boat, in order to be there when Jesus went ashore. The Gospel tells us it was the Passover. This feast was a religious occasion but it was also like a trip to the seaside, an outing, entertainment mixed with religious observance. It would be fun to turn aside and take a look at this strange teacher and healer whom everyone was talking about.

One of the most telling phrases in the whole story is the bit where it says that Jesus asked Philip *Whence shall we buy bread that these may eat?* It's only a detail. But it is precisely details like this which have the stamp of verisimilitude. Why mention it if it wasn't true? There is profound mystery in small details. Who is this *lad here which hath five barley loaves?* It calls to mind other strange details. Remember the arrest of Jesus and *a certain young man, having a linen cloth cast about his naked body...and he left the linen cloth and fled from them naked. Again, And entering into the sepulchre, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment...* Mysterious details, but I do not believe them to be spurious.

The bread was not of wheat but *barley loaves* – that is the cheapest bread, the bread the poor could afford. And the fish are not called by the usual name for a fish *ἰχθύς* but they are *οψαρία* – a sort of pickled fish. And this word for fish is used nowhere else in the New Testament. Anyhow, there wouldn't be much flesh on them. I remember arriving at our hotel in Israel and being taken down to dinner by our hosts. On the menu was St Peter's fish, caught in the Sea of Galilee. I ate two. I was starving before I started and I was still starving when I'd finished.

Jesus gives thanks and the word is *εὐχαριστήσας* – the word used of the head of the family when he says Grace. The word became central to the celebration of the Holy Communion. There is another Eucharistic connection when Jesus says, *Gather up the fragments that remain that nothing be lost.* This is what is done with the bread at the Holy Communion and it is here that we approach the great significance of the feeding of the five thousand: it is a foreshadowing of the Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the Mass. For St John's Gospel, in the very same chapter, follows this miracle story with those even more outrageous words of Jesus:

*I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever, and the bread which I will give is my flesh....Whoso eateth my flesh and drinketh my*

*blood hath eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.*

This is to say that the sacramental bread of his Body is of more lasting significance than the loaves which fed the five thousand. But the tremendous impact of Jesus' saying that he will give us the Sacrament of his Body to eat is made even more telling, even more miraculous, because it comes *after* he had miraculously fed their bodily hunger. The promise of the Sacrament of his Body was no pretentious rhetoric: it was the greater gift made by the man who had first multiplied the loaves and fishes.

This is the great theme of the whole of St John's Gospel from the very beginning at Christmas when he tells us *the Word was made flesh*. St John is obsessed with God's implanting himself in the natural world and using natural things to embody – to incarnate – his eternal truth. It's not just that God uses material things as visual aids, what many confusedly refer to as *symbols*. The material things actually *partake* of the spiritual reality. In fact there is no spiritual reality without them. So Christ's Incarnation into real flesh. The water into wine. The physical Sacrament of the Body and Blood. His real death on the Cross, with real nails and a real spear. And his glorious Resurrection – *in the Body*. All these things are enacted in the physical world and they are *real*.

The deadliest enemy of the Christian faith is not materialism: it is spirituality; it is abstraction; it is to exalt the theoretical over the actual, as George Eliot said, *the diagram over the picture*. For years I taught an evening class in theology at York and there was one member of my class who always looked even more dissatisfied than all the others. He would thank me for my words, but then complain that they hadn't been *spiritual* enough. His idea of religion was an escape from the flesh, from physicality, from the messiness of the world of created things. He treasured hopes of some pure, ideal, disembodied higher realm. This may be Gnosticism or the aim of Vedanta or the dream-world of Nirvana, or the *putting into place of systems* which modern governments are so fond of doing. But it is not Christianity; it is not the Gospel.

For Our Lord took the actual loaves and fed the five thousand. Then he gave his real Body for us on the Cross. And in the *mysterium fidei* – the mystery of faith – he gives us his real Body again in the Sacrament of the Altar: the Bread of Life: the Bread of Heaven on which we feed, for his flesh is meat indeed.