

*A sermon preached by David Wilbourne at the 10 am Eucharist for Trinity 16.*

*Gospel: Mark 6:30-44*

I was 25, newly ordained, shyly beginning work in Middlesbrough. My landlady was the headmistress of a primary school in the roughest part of town, where she insisted that I lead an assembly. To be honest, I was hoping to leave it a bit before I first ventured into schools - after all, taking a school assembly is a close to a near-death experience you'll ever have - but my landlady was the sort of headmistress who brooked no refusal: faced by her on full throttle, even God would have complied. So there I was, sitting at the front of the hall, shaking, and they all marched in under my landlady's eagle eye, backs ramrod straight, arms swinging by their sides: and that was just the teachers! My assembly was quite simple as assemblies go. Just a bag of crisps which I invited some of the 250 children to sample and guess the flavour. Salt and vinegar? No. Cheese and onion? No. Plain? No. They all looked puzzled, because there weren't really any other flavours around in those benighted days before Garry Linekar took the crisp world by storm. 'The flavour is fish and bread,' I boldly proclaimed. My infant audience looked even more perplexed.

My point of course was simple. Jesus had fed an audience 20 times as big as mine with the equivalent of my bag of crisps. To hammer home my point, I taught the children a little ditty:

*With two little fishes and five loaves of bread 5000 people by Jesus were fed. All of this happened because one little lad gladly gave Jesus all that he had. All that I have, all that I have, I will give Jesus all that I have.*

I then bade them all a hurried farewell and got out while the going was good, speeding away in my Simca 1100, a miracle in itself, since the words *speeding* and *Simca 1100* didn't usually occur in the same sentence.

My first hesitant assembly said it all, really. We offer Jesus so little and he responds graciously and massively with a profligate abundance, so much food that there is a 12 basket-full surplus, even after everyone is full. Just a little, but even our little is necessary for Christ to do his stuff 5000 times two fishes and five loaves makes 10,000 fish and 25,000 loaves. 5000 times nothing makes nothing!

Apparently it's the miracle that most Christians love to disbelieve. I don't want to go down that road of seeing miracles as a literary construct rather than event. I'm no fundamentalist. I'm a writer and I know how I manipulate words to colour things, even move events around to hammer home my point. But there's always an event to start with which inspires and fires me, and I passionately believe that God spoke mightily through the event of Jesus Christ. After all, the Word was made flesh and pitched his tent amongst us, setting out his wares. I am wary of making the flesh revert to Word. Christians are not the people of the book rather our bible is the book of the people, a record of real people, real flesh, with all their joys and sorrows, miracles and disappointments. Jesus is a real person who did real things. Something massive happened with him that has both fired and delightfully confused the world and the church for two millennia, drawing millions to make massive sacrifices for their Lord, even unto death. People do not die for a literary construct. My all time favourite book is Saki's short stories. I love them, madly, truly, deeply, but I would never ever die for them People have died, do die for a miracle, which carries the promise of a kingdom which is not of this world.

You look at any miracle in the Gospels and critical scholars will always give reasons why it never actually happened. Rather that it is a myth, a profound story hammering home a deep theological meaning. And the meanings behind are miracle this morning are manifold. We do try to rationalise miracles away, such as claiming that the little boy's generosity in offering his picnic gave the rest of the crowd the nerve to share their picnics, which previously they had

hoarded, with 'Dare to share,' the maxim that challenges us hoarders across the centuries. As maxims go, it is a very good one, but the method of distribution with food passing from Jesus to the disciples to the people, like some sort of prequel to communion administration, and the fact that twelve baskets of broken bread and fish were left over suggests far more than a drastically over-catered for picnic.

Miraculous feedings have got form in the Bible, with Moses producing manna to feed the hungry Israelites stacked up in the wilderness, and both the prophets Elijah and Elisha producing surplus food when famine was the order of the day. Ascribing such a miracle to Jesus puts him firmly in these ecclesiastical big boys' league.

And clearly this particular miracle catches Jesus' heart's desire is to feed his starving children, just as the particular healing miracles illustrate his heart's desire to heal his suffering children.

The disciples tell Jesus why it can't be done. Far too expensive to buy food for 5000, 200 denarii, 200 days' wages, £10,000! Impossible. But Jesus does it, Jesus fixes it.

Or the miracle could be short hand for the miracle of seed-time and harvest that happens under our very noses and we take for granted, with just one seed seasoned with a little sunshine, rain and good soil producing food in abundance. But all these points could be just as well made by event rather than constructed story. We tend to be distrustful of mere words, 'I cannot hear what you say, because what you are keeps ringing in my ears.' The miracles bold proclaim what Jesus is, and despite tons of scholarship questioning their historicity, the jury is still out over whether they happened or not.

And I prefer it to stay out, because miracles point to a bigger reality than the narrow limited horizons we normally labour under. C S Lewis claimed that miracles rather than undermining our natural world, actually sharpened our appreciation of it. 'Only Supernaturalists really see Nature.

You must go a little away from her,

and then turn round, and look back.

Then at last the true landscape will become visible.

You must have tasted, however briefly,

the pure water from beyond the world

before you can be distinctly conscious

of the hot, salty tang of Nature's current.'

Two post-scripts In Mark's previous verses we have record of another feast at Herod's birthday party, a sort of Great Jewish Bake-Off, with the macabre piece de resistance, the show-stopper, the head of John the Baptist served up on a plate. Jesus' feast teemed with life in all its fullness, Herod's feast culminated in death. A double shock there for Jesus, not just the grisly death of his cousin, miraculously born, but also the realisation that this is the terrible destiny of those who make a stand for God. This is a Gethsemane moment as Jesus steals away to a quiet spot on the lake to pray over his fate.

But life and need breaks in in the shape of the sore-footed crowd who have legged it around the lake, craving for healing, craving for feeding. Even when the heaviest tragedy hits you, worry not, life and need will find you out and give you a reason for living. And the Greek word Mark uses for those twelve baskets is κοφινος from which we get the word coffer and coffin.

That fires all sorts of reflection. Twelve treasure chests of broken bread left over after the event, a Eucharstic precursor where Christ took the bread, blessed it, broke it and returned it, a rich deposit to feed Christ's disciples through the ages, broken bread which speaks of his broken body feeding his followers with his life, rations for the troops.

Twelve coffins? Well, there were twelve disciples, a dozy lot who time and time again failed to get the point, who when it came to the crunch ran off and left their Lord to die alone. Twelve

coffins: dead wood. Yet Jesus breathed his risen spirit on their deadness and they took on the world and won it for him.

We come to the coffers this morning to feed on him. We are the coffins full of so much deadness who ache for his life. So many coffins around, an unimaginable number, as we move to celebrate the end of the Great War. Yet here we are, still standing, despite that halocaust.

Hurray, I'm alive, you're alive, All that I have, I will give Jesus all that I have. Don't be afraid of giving him your dead stuff, your equivalent of a co-op tin of sardines and half a dozen stale bread buns. Which 5000 will your little feed today? Or will you hoard it and feed no one?

Three very wealthy Scottish misers who never give away a crumb end up in hell. 'We didna ken, we didna ken,' is the cry they beseech God with. 'Well, ye ken noo, ye ken noo,' God, who of course is Scottish too, replies. Don't leave it too late to let it all go. Ye ken noo, you've seen the miracle. Now be the miracle!