

“Relief in the Wilderness”

Matthew 14: 13-21

Proper 13A, Boise, 2020

What does one say about a miracle in the Gospels other than that Jesus performed it and someone or another was relieved of suffering? In this story we just read, a great many persons were suffering the pangs of hunger, and the Messiah fed them all with not much to work with. We knew He could do it, because He is the Son of God. But can a preacher give a whole sermon on that without boring his audience? And most of you have already heard a number of sermons on the Feeding of the 5,000, because it is one of two miracles Jesus did that is all four Gospels. You're going to get the story in one version or another every year as one of our readings. And Matthew and Mark both add a second miracle of our Lord's feeding another 4,000 on the other side of the Jordan in Gentile territory. Jesus feeds Jews and Gentiles alike when they follow Him.

Well, just the frequency of the miracles of feeding in the Gospels indicates that the first evangelists found they had a lot to say about Jesus and His mission. NT scholars have been telling us for the past century that the miracles of Jesus that made it into the canonical texts were those that they preached on as they told the story of Jesus the Messiah around the Mediterranean. Every miracle in the Gospels thus has a message, and one that each generation needs to hear.

So what is the message of this one? That God is provident and gives those who follow Him what we need? I would say that He did more than that here. The Divine Father, acting through His Son and the Holy Spirit, not only fed the hungry; in His overabundance He gave them twelve basketfuls left over, so that they might share the loaves and fishes with others. There is a prophecy in Isaiah concerning a great banquet God would provide for His people in the age to come.

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well-refined [Isa 25:6].

Might the simple yet plentiful fare that Christ provided the people He led have been a harbinger of that grander feast promised in Isaiah?

The Isaian prophecy adds another dimension to the NT story. Call it “the eschatological dimension.” The miracles Our Lord performed during the three years of His earthly ministry were not literally “the last thing,” which is what the Greek word “*eschaton*” means. But when viewed against the backdrop of OT prophecy, they give a clear signal that the end is on its way, an end that is good, a conclusion of human history that God Himself will write with the finger of His own Providence. Those who follow the Messiah and continue with Him to the end, even if it means spending time with Him in some desolate places, will be provided for in great abundance. In the age to come, material abundance, the prodigal richness of His re-creation of all things in Christ [Eph 1: 10], will be the outward sign of the spiritual wealth that His followers can enjoy even now as members of His Mystical Body in communion with the ascended Head.

Now what about the two OT texts given in our lectionary readings for the day? Do they add yet more depth to the miracle in the Gospel? Both the chanted Psalm text and the excerpt of a communal prayer in Nehemiah look backward in sober reflection on the disobediences of Israel in the wilderness, which followed her coming out of Egypt. The fashioning of the Golden Calf, their dissatisfaction with the manna in their lusting for meat, the attempt to overthrow Moses and Aaron and appoint another leader who would take them back to Egypt — those were the kinds of mistake, rebellion against the LORD, that the Jews did not want to repeat after their return from Babylonian exile. Isaiah, in his prophecies of the Return, described it as a new exodus, more glorious than the first. The journey from Mesopotamia back to the Promised Land, though long in

distance, was to be an easy walk. No forty years of wandering this time. They could take the straight highway to Zion. “Every valley” would be “lifted . . . , every mountain and hill . . . made low, the uneven ground leveled, and the rough places made smooth” [Isa 40: 3b-4].

And now it was done. The Jews, released by Cyrus and the Persians from their captivity in Babylon, stood in assembly before the rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem, with the rebuilt walls and gates at their backs, confessing their sins and asking for God’s help to do better than they had under the leadership of Moses and Aaron and the kings that followed David. “O God, You have given us a fresh start, and this time we intend not to screw things up.” That is my colloquial version of your OT lesson for today. — But there were more screw-ups, as would always be the case whenever fallen human nature reasserts itself.

Now, if you’re wondering what any of that has to do with the feeding of a multitude of people in Galilee, a half-millennium later, then it is time to begin the story again, paying close attention to what on our first reading may have seemed insignificant detail. “Now when Jesus heard this,” the news that John the Baptist had been beheaded,

He withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by Himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed Him on foot from the towns. When He went ashore He saw a great crowd Now when it was evening, the disciples came to Him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.”

And what was Jesus’ answer? “No, I will not send them away. They have followed Me into this wilderness here, and so now I will take care of them.”

What we have here is a common NT theme, which St Matthew the Evangelist especially loves: Jesus as the new Moses, who will take His followers in a new exodus to a better Promised Land. Before Jesus even arrived

on the scene, John the Baptist was preaching from Isaiah that this newer “new exodus,” one that was moral and spiritual in nature was about to begin. And now here in chapter 14 of the First Gospel, with John just having been removed from the action by Herod, Jesus the Messiah is seen leading this spiritual exodus without his assistance. The Christ Himself will lead us out of our Adamic condition, through the wilderness of His Passion, where He will break the bonds of our sins, and into new, resurrected life, to be enjoyed in a new and more splendid Jerusalem, where we shall reign with Our Lord and Saviour, assisting in the administration of the Kingdom.

You see, the Exodus is the Bible’s ur-story. It is for both Jews and Christians. It provided the template for the rest of Israel and the Church’s history. As we can see in the return from the Babylonian exile announced by Isaiah, the theme keeps repeating. Or we might say that the Exodus from Egypt, journey through the wilderness, and Conquest of Canaan provide the frame within which the other stories unfold. And the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the last and grandest of those iterations, the one that completes the set. With the Gospel, we really do get out of bondage, through the wilderness (whatever form that takes in our individual lives), and into the Land of Promise, where we can rest from our labors in God’s presence.

That’s the big picture, the full story. So let us return one last time to our Gospel of the day, and ask where we are in it with this miracle Jesus performed, the Feeding of the 5,000. It’s a little exodus that He leads with this group of Jews to a “desolate place” in Galilee, but how does it relate to the big exodus of mankind’s salvation? It is presented by St Matthew and the other Evangelists as the Messiah’s giving His followers relief in the wilderness. They are in the wilderness and not yet in the Promised Land — a situation that also applies to us. The meal Jesus provides for both the persons in the story and for us today is not the sumptuous banquet that Isaiah prophesied for the age to come. The fare

is simple but generous, like the manna God rained down on the multitude in the original Exodus when they entered the desert. The food is enough to sustain us while we are on our way, and when we are walking with Our Lord through the wilderness, enough is a feast. We should be happy that we are free and moving forward. The fleshpots we left behind in the land of our bondage are nothing more than a temptation to return to our former bondage, a temptation we will resist.

Let us now concentrate on the present task: we must distribute the bountiful surplus of loaves and fishes to the nations, so that all who are called will walk with Jesus and us to that land promised in the Gospel.

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