

PENTECOST VII

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled. Matthew 14:20

How many of you entertain some skepticism about whether Jesus and his disciples actually fed 5000 men, not to mention women and children, with just 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish? How many of you think it's important to believe the story literally? Don't worry, there are no wrong answers here.

Early Christians thought the story very important. For one thing, it's the only story recorded in all four gospels, and there's a variant in Matthew and Mark, making a total of 6 times we here about the astounding event.

Plenty of conservative and fundamentalist Christians do believe in the literal and miraculous nature of the account, because they think the bible is historical fact. We don't; that is, Anglican mainstream theology does not.

The story has an historical core: Jesus was an historical person, a compassionate person who responded to people in need. Beyond that, a number of interpretations of the event have been offered. Albert Schweitzer argued that Jesus presided over a symbolic meal for multitudes of his followers in the desert, in which bits of bread were distributed, and that this happening later developed into a miracle story. Another explanation is that what "really" occurred was a lesson in unselfishness, as Jesus and his disciples shared what little food they had, thus shaming all the 5000 men (and women and children extra) into sharing their food so that all were fed.

Yet another suggestion: that Jesus led his followers into the desert for a time during which they lived frugally on skimpy rations, and that exercise transmuted into a miracle story.

A more comprehensive explanation, and the one I subscribe to, goes like this. The story doesn't report on a specific event in Jesus' life, but rather represents the entire meaning of his life and ministry. It foreshadows, in retrospect if you will, the Last Supper. In other words, the Last Supper, Jesus' institution of the Eucharistic meal, really did happen, and the Gospel writers created stories to anticipate that event, stories that encompassed large numbers of men (and women and children). And those large numbers would represent the nascent Christian church, as it emerged and grew during the lives of the Gospel writers. Also, the story has overtones of the promised arrival of the reign of God, when fellowship and plenty shall be available to all, the rule and not the exception.

So, I believe the story of the loaves and the fishes is symbolic, in a profound and expansive way. In this charming — and I do find it appealing— account of 5000 men (not to mention woman and children) seated on a hillside, all eating their fill. A kind of picnic on the shore of Galilee, with the leftovers filling 12 baskets. And there's no reason it shouldn't be an attractive story— it's meant, as all Gospel stories are meant, to engage and to teach. I believe the portrait is one of God's desire and gift, in Jesus, Christ incarnate, of meeting human need, satisfying human hunger, whether physical or spiritual.

But I don't think this tale is symbolic in an abstract, aerie-faerie kind of way. I don't think it excludes or replaces a concrete picture of Jesus and his disciples meeting real human need. They did, or they would have had no

followers. They did, or there would be no church. They did, or we would not be here now.

In a course I took recently, all of us were asked where we met God in our lives. My answer was, *in church*. I meet God in other places as well, but most reliably, most predictably and regularly, I meet God here in church. I meet God in the liturgy and in the music. But most of all, I meet God in and among all of you. I heard somewhere that the only business a preacher has preaching is to say: *Wow! God is here!*

Wow! God is here! I hope and pray that you meet God here, as I do. In the liturgy, in the music, and most of all, in and among one another. Or at least I pray that you come here every week *hoping* to meet God, looking for God, being attentive to signs of the presence of God. And I pray that you leave here each week, as I do, feeling fed. Fed by the spiritual food and drink of the Eucharistic feast, and fed by the companionship of those around you. Fed as the 5000 (plus women and children) were fed on that hillside at Galilee.

That was then, this is now. But the truth is the same, now and forever. God is the source, we are the resources. And Jesus is our loving brother who reminds us, always and everywhere, to give each other *something to eat*.

Alleluia! Amen

