

Confronting a Mystery

Jesus Feeds the Multitude

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men. (Mk 6:41–44)

I have always had a difficult time with the gospel stories of Jesus feeding the multitude. They seem too far removed from ordinary human experience to be taken at face value. Multiplying loaves and fish to feed a cast of thousands is hard to envision. Where did these extra loaves and fish come from? Who put them there? Did they simply appear out of nowhere? Does faith in Jesus require suspending one's belief in the laws of nature? I certainly hope not.

When reading these accounts I often find myself reacting to them with a strange mixture of childlike trust and deep-seated suspicion. It would be nice to believe that Jesus could perform such miracles, but his doing so

6 Eucharist: Exploring the Diamond of Our Faith

would create as many problems as it would solve. Why, for example, would God intervene in human affairs on this particular occasion and not in the many other situations of intense hunger that have plagued humanity throughout its history? Does not such selective generosity reflect a degree of indifference (perhaps even cruelty) in God? If not, then how else can we explain God's unwillingness to step in on our behalf in other equally (perhaps even more) urgent and needy cases? I have mixed reactions when confronted with these stories. I feel pulled in opposite directions: wanting to believe yet somehow holding back. I wish I could have been there to judge whatever happened for myself.

Despite these difficulties, the stories of Jesus feeding the multitude still excite the imagination and lead us to ponder the power of Jesus' presence in our midst. When reading them I often try to place myself in the scene as an active participant in the unfolding drama rather than as a detached and distant onlooker. Doing so helps me to place my suspicions aside so that the deep spiritual meaning of these stories can rise to the surface, engage me in the present moment, and penetrate my heart. Reading them in this way does not answer all my questions—not by a long shot. Doing so, however, raises different, more important questions for me about Jesus' identity and mission. These stories confront me with the mystery of Christ and his power to feed my deep inner hungers. Once these are satisfied, whatever other misgivings I may have about the validity of the accounts move to the background or gently fall into place.

The Bare Bones

The account of Jesus feeding the multitude appears six times in the gospels: twice in Matthew (14:15–21; 15:32–39), twice in Mark (6:34–44; 8:1–10), and once each in both Luke (9:10–17) and John (6:1–15). No other gospel episode comes close to this high number of occurrences. The frequency of its appearance in these sacred texts attests to both its popularity and its importance for the early Christian community. Although each of the gospel writers emphasizes different elements of the story to support his particular theological vision, all of them employ the same narrative substructure and a number of themes fundamental to the early Christian kerygma. Although it is impossible to determine what exactly happened at

this important crossroad of Jesus' Galilean ministry, the event clearly made a deep impression on his followers, one that they would look back to time and again as a turning point in Jesus' life and mission.

As narrated by the evangelists, the basic plot of these accounts is simple and easy to distill. Aside from some minor discrepancies in detail, the underlying substructure of the narratives remains fundamentally the same. A large crowd follows Jesus to an out-of-the-way place, where he teaches them at length. Late in the day a request comes that he should send the crowd away so that they can find food to eat. Jesus suggests that the disciples use their own resources to feed the crowd. They respond that they cannot feed such a large group with only a few loaves of bread and some fish. Jesus then instructs his disciples to have the people rest on the ground. He then takes the bread and fish, looks up to heaven, blesses them, breaks them, and distributes them. The people eat until they have had enough, and the disciples collect an abundance of leftover food.

The accounts differ in such details as the size of the gathering, the dialogue between Jesus and his disciples, the number of loaves and fish, the way the people rest on the ground, the manner of distribution, and the number of baskets of leftovers collected. They agree, however, on the basic elements of the story and are unanimous in their perception that what took place was a convincing display of Jesus' prodigious power. The more common title of the account, "The Multiplication of the Loaves and Fish," emphasizes this prominent feature of the event.

Interpreting the Event

When going through the various accounts of this episode we need to remember that the evangelists were not trying to write a "history" in the modern sense of the term. The gospels are first and foremost documents of faith. Such a statement does not mean that they do not contain historical evidence or that the evangelists were deliberately trying to distort "the facts" of a particular event. It only means that they were trying to express in words what they had discovered about the meaning and message of Jesus of Nazareth.

All of their memories of his historical life were filtered through their experience of him in the Christ event: their encounter of Jesus in his pas-

8 Eucharist: Exploring the Diamond of Our Faith

sion, death, and resurrection influenced their understanding of his public ministry and affected the way they presented their recollection of him. We must also remember that modern science today tends to discount the notion of an objective truth (historical or otherwise) existing independently from our capacity to observe it. We influence what we observe just as much as we are influenced by it, if not more. Historical truth is always an interpretation of one's experience of what happened. While some interpretations may be determined to be more satisfactory than others, the most we can ever arrive at is an interpretation of what occurred.

In light of the above, the various discrepancies in the six accounts of Jesus feeding the multitude can be explained not only by the different theological aims of the evangelists, but also by different perceptions of the eyewitnesses themselves. Did the disciples have five loaves and two fish or seven loaves and a few small fish? Did they have twelve baskets left over or only seven? Were there five thousand present that day or only four? Did the number include the women and children present—or not? Rather than explaining these differences away by maintaining that Jesus fed the multitudes on at least two separate occasions (hence the duplicate versions preserved in the gospels of Matthew and Mark), we can simplify matters by saying that what occurred was perceived differently by those present and handed down orally as different traditions. These traditions were eventually written and made their way into the gospel narratives as two separate occurrences. Today most exegetes generally agree with this simpler explanation of the event.

A Look to Elisha

In addition to different perceptions of what took place, it makes perfect sense that the evangelists would have looked to the Hebrew Scriptures for certain points of reference to help them mold the account of Jesus' feeding of the multitude into an appropriate narrative shape. For them, doing so would not be a falsification of what happened in that deserted place near the end of Jesus' ministry in Galilee, but an even deeper affirmation of it.

In the present instance, the accounts in question bear a remarkable resemblance to the following story of the prophet Elisha's multiplication of the loaves in 2 Kings 4:42–44:

A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, "Give it to the people and let them eat." But his servant said, "How can I set this before a hundred people?" So he repeated, "Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, 'They shall eat and have some left.'" He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.

According to Reginald Fuller, this story from the Elisha cycle (2 Kings 2:1–8:29) serves as "the literary prototype" of the various gospel accounts of Jesus feeding the multitude. All follow the same basic pattern found in this very brief story: "(1) food is brought to the man of God; (2) the amount of food is specified; (3) it is objected that the quantity is inadequate; (4) behaving as master of the situation the man of God ignores the objection and commands the food to be distributed; (5) the crowd not only have enough to eat, but there was some left."¹

The benefit to shaping the account of Jesus' feeding of the multitude after Elisha's multiplication of the loaves is plain. Elisha took up the mantle of Elijah and succeeded him as the Lord's prophet. By adopting this narrative substructure, the sacred authors depict Jesus as the New Elijah who speaks the Word of God to God's people and performs wonderful feats on their behalf. When seen in this light, Jesus' feeding of the multitude takes on the dimensions of a prophetic action. As an authentic utterance of the Word of God, this action points beyond itself and actually brings into effect what it symbolizes. From this perspective the event can easily be understood as a foreshadowing of the Eucharist, a meal that itself is considered a foretaste of the messianic banquet.

The New Moses

Another Old Testament figure whose story influences the interpretation of the account of Jesus feeding the multitude is Moses. Unlike the Elisha story, which provides the narrative substructure for the gospel accounts, the connection between Moses and Jesus as the New Moses comes about by the placement of individual accounts within the larger gospel narra-

1. *Preaching the New Lectionary* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1974), 406.

tives. Although a parallel between the Exodus account of the manna from heaven and the multiplication of the loaves would be easy enough to draw, this typology does not figure greatly in the actual text of the multiplication accounts themselves. To find the connection between Moses and Jesus, one has to study the accounts of the feeding of the multitude in their larger literary contexts.

Moses, the great prophet and lawgiver of the Jewish people, was also the instrument of many miraculous interventions, most notable of which was his parting of the Red Sea (Ex 14:10–22). Among the miracles he performed during their forty years of wandering in the desert were those of the manna and quail (Ex 16:1–15) and the drawing of water from the rock (Ex 17:1–7). In both instances, Moses served as intercessor for his people, hearing their bickering and quarrelsome complaints, bringing them to God, and then acting as the Lord’s chosen instrument. If God had not intervened through him in these miraculous ways, Moses would have lost his authority over his people and they would have continued to wander without direction in the desert of Sinai.

The comparison with Jesus is most telling. While Moses could command the sea and provide his people with food and water, the evangelists have Jesus performing similar and even more astounding feats. When he feeds the multitude, he does not provide his hungry listeners with a mere wafer-like substance that appeared as “a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground” (Ex 16:14), but multiplies real bread to fill and satisfy their empty stomachs. In three of the accounts, he walks on water immediately after feeding the multitude (see Mt 14:22–33; Mk 6:45–52; Jn 6:16–24), a much more marvelous event than merely drawing water from a rock or even parting a sea so that one could walk through it. In the Gospel of Luke, the account of the Jesus calming the storm (Lk 8:22–25) occurs in close proximity to the miracle of the loaves and fish (Lk 9:10–17). These miracles performed by Jesus in his own name far exceed anything by Moses for his people in God’s name.

By all counts, Jesus is the New Moses, the prophet of the New Covenant. The episode of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes evokes Moses’ miracle of the manna and quail—and far surpasses it. John’s gospel makes this connection explicit in Jesus’ discourse on the Bread of Life (Jn 6:25–59),

which appears immediately after the accounts of Jesus feeding the multitude (Jn 6:1–15) and walking on water (Jn 6:16–24). The Synoptic Gospels make the same connection by placing the account of the transfiguration (Mt 17:1–8; Mk 9:2–8; Lk 9:28–36) in close proximity to the multiplication miracles. High atop the mountain of the transfiguration, Jesus converses with Moses and Elijah because he continues their mission to God’s people and brings it to fulfillment. The accounts of the multiplication of the loaves and fish reinforce this point by virtue of the narrative substructure they follow and the larger literary context in which they are placed.

Eucharistic Symbolism

In addition to the Old Testament figures of Elisha and Moses, the primitive Christian community also allowed their celebration of the Eucharist to guide their interpretation of Jesus’ feeding of the multitude. The accounts are filled with the symbols and language of the eucharistic liturgy: “reclining” or “sitting down,” “taking the loaves,” “blessing the bread,” “breaking it,” “giving it,” “eating it”—to name but a few. Jesus’ request, moreover, that the crowd break up into small groups reflects the intimate atmosphere of the early domestic churches prevalent in the early years of Christian missionary expansion when local church membership was still relatively small. We should keep in mind that the early Christians looked not only to the Last Supper as the basis for the eucharistic celebration, but also to their mealtime fellowship with Jesus both during his lifetime and in his post-resurrectional appearances. It was quite natural for them, therefore, to weave eucharistic imagery and symbolism into accounts of their humble yet refreshing repasts with the Lord.

When interpreted in the light of the early Christian liturgy, the accounts of Jesus feeding the multitude become a concrete foreshadowing of the Eucharist. It is interesting to note, however, that the sacrificial aspect of the meal—the connection between the Last Supper and Calvary—is not heavily emphasized. This is so possibly because the priestly nature of Jesus’ commemorative meal and its close relationship to his sacrificial death may not have surfaced yet in the awareness of the believing community. That is not to say that this intrinsic relationship did not exist at the time and is therefore nothing but a later doctrinal accretion, but that the

believing community had simply not yet come to an understanding of the full significance of the breaking of the bread. In the accounts of Jesus feeding the multitude, the pervading eucharistic imagery points much more forcefully to the celebration of the messianic banquet. The division into groups of hundreds and fifties (see Mk 6:40; Lk 9:14) and the abundant leftovers (Mt 14:20; 15:37; Mk 5:43; 8:8; Lk 9:17; Jn 6:13) point to the bountiful refreshment that will take place at such a meal.

The eucharistic symbolism permeating these accounts also allows the liturgical nature of the gospel texts themselves to come to light. These narratives were put together not for private devotion, but to be read aloud during a community celebration. This important liturgical context provides yet another reason for seeing in the multiplication of the loaves and fish a foreshadowing in the life of Jesus of the meal that he asked his disciples to celebrate in his memory. The eucharistic symbolism in the accounts helps the believing community to identify more closely with the action of Jesus that is taking place before them. Just as Jesus performed the miracle of the loaves and fish, they are invited—through the symbols in the text and in the action in which they are presently participating—to behold another miracle that will soon take place in the breaking of the bread. When seen in this light, the accounts of Jesus feeding the multitude help the believing community to enter more deeply into eucharistic celebration. What Jesus performed in a very visible and physical way during his public ministry is now being realized even more powerfully (albeit invisibly) in the breaking of the bread.

Reflection

As with most miracle stories, the accounts of Jesus feeding the multitudes bring us face to face with what we believe. While we will never be able to determine what exactly took place on that occasion, we know that it impressed Jesus' followers strongly enough to record it more than any other gospel story.

When confronted with these miracle stories, however, many of us give in to the tendency to explain them away by means of some natural occurrence. In the case of the multiplication of the loaves and fish, the most common explanation is that Jesus performed a miracle not of nature but

of the heart. According to this scenario, as the crowd saw Jesus' disciples sharing what little they had with others, their hearts were so moved that they opened their own haversacks and began to do the same.

The proponents of this interpretation argue that it would have been highly unlikely for so many people to follow Jesus into such a deserted, out-of-the-way place with no provisions of any kind. Moved by the example of Jesus and his disciples, the crowd was able to feed itself from its own resources. So great was this action of mass sharing that everyone was filled to satisfaction and many leftovers were collected.

This explanation of the multiplication of the loaves remains popular in some corners. Unwilling to accept the possibility of divine intervention of any sort, some exegetes find in this explanation a feasible way of explaining the details of the accounts without having to admit the presence and action of a supernatural power.

The problem with this explanation, however, is that it explains away too much. Although it is true that Jesus could have affected a change of heart in so many people without a miraculous display of power, such an interpretation undermines our trust in his ability to do otherwise. Jesus' multiplication of the loaves and fish, and the manner in which he did it, has a direct bearing on the mysterious nature of his identity. Although the natural interpretation of the event may satisfy our rational doubts and uncertainties, it evades too easily the episode's central focus.

The accounts of Jesus feeding the multitude bring us face to face with the mystery of Christ. To deprive these accounts of the miraculous deflates the significance they had in the primitive Christian community and diminishes our own understanding of the power and glory of Christ. Doing so means that we place more trust in the power of reason (and a very limited notion of it, at that) than in the person of Jesus. The very purpose of these gospel accounts, however, is to increase our trust in Jesus' role as the prophet of the New Covenant and host of the messianic banquet. If the line is not drawn somewhere, the attitude supporting this natural interpretation of Jesus feeding the multitude will influence other elements of the gospel narrative, even the resurrection. Once the miracle has been taken out of Christianity, we will be left with nothing but an empty doctrinal shell devoid of any real power to initiate the reign of God in the world.

Conclusion

To be honest, most of us probably have ambivalent feelings toward the various accounts of Jesus feeding the multitude. I know I do. A part of us wants to believe in the miracle as it is told by the gospel writers; another part of us is skeptical about miracles in general and of this kind in particular.

The multiplication of the loaves and fish seems to contradict all that we were ever taught about the laws of nature. We wonder where our faith will lead us if we suspend skepticism in this instance and allow for a divine exception. At the same time, Christian belief tells us that God created the universe out of nothing and continues to hold it in being. If this basic tenet of the faith is true, then it seems quite rational to conclude that an all-powerful creator could just as easily produce something out of something (bread from bread).

Our problem with the account of Jesus feeding the multitude is that it puts us in touch with a fundamental conflict in our belief system. We find ourselves, at one and the same time, both believing it and disbelieving it, hoping in its truth, yet somehow in touch with an underground current of doubt telling us that it could not possibly be so. Through this difficult and quite precarious “coincidence of opposites,” the accounts provide us with the unique opportunity to plumb the depths of our faith and to examine the assumptions supporting it.

As we go about doing so, we should realize that such struggles regarding the possibility of divine intervention were largely foreign to the world of the primitive Christian community. What came easily to them comes to us only with great difficulty and much prayer. In either case, when reading these accounts believers from both worlds ultimately come up against the same unfolding reality in their lives—an existential encounter with the unfathomable mystery of Christ.

Reflection Questions

- What do you find believable in the accounts of Jesus feeding the multitude? What do you find difficult to accept? What criteria do you use for determining what is believable or not?
- Do you believe in miracles? What is your attitude toward the possibility of divine intervention in the world? In what way does this attitude shape your interpretation of these accounts?

- What were the gospel authors trying to say through the accounts of the multiplication of the loaves and fish? Is their message still fresh? Does it need to be adapted in any way?
- In what way does Jesus follow in the footsteps of the prophets Elisha and Moses? In what way does he transcend them?
- In what way do these accounts confront you with the mystery of Jesus? What do they lead you to affirm or reject about his identity?