

Matthew 14:13-21

The Message

Supper for Five Thousand

13-14 When Jesus got the news, he slipped away by boat to an out-of-the-way place by himself. But unsuccessfully—someone saw him and the word got around. Soon a lot of people from the nearby villages walked around the lake to where he was. When he saw them coming, he was overcome with pity and healed their sick.

15 Toward evening the disciples approached him. “We’re out in the country and it’s getting late. Dismiss the people so they can go to the villages and get some supper.”

16 But Jesus said, “There is no need to dismiss them. You give them supper.”

17 “All we have are five loaves of bread and two fish,” they said.

18-21 Jesus said, “Bring them here.” Then he had the people sit on the grass. He took the five loaves and two fish, lifted his face to heaven in prayer, blessed, broke, and gave the bread to the disciples. The disciples then gave the food to the congregation. They all ate their fill. They gathered twelve baskets of leftovers. About five thousand were fed

Sermon

This week has been my return to gym. It’s been a painful, sweaty affair that has left me feeling more than a little sore and sorry for myself. I ruefully reflect that many of the people who sweat, grunt and strain are in search of the elusive miracle of suddenly looking like a statue of a Greek God, no matter how improbable that may be. As I hobble with stiff muscles, wincing at any sudden movement, I ruefully reflect that the only Greek God I resemble at the moment is Hephaestus.

I am also painfully aware that the fairly modest hope of a 55 year old to be able to keep his health a little longer sometimes morphs into something more sinister for others- that many young men in particular have what was originally known as “bigitis”- the desire to have a more and more unrealistic body shape that can involve the use of steroids and eating disorders. And we are all aware of the debilitating effect of eating disorders on young people who literally starve themselves to death in the pursuit of beauty.

Modern advertising tries to sell us an unrealistic miracle over and over again – that somehow the possession of something as inconsequential as a brand of alcohol makes you the life of the party no matter your social anxieties. Or that an expensive gas guzzling car somehow frees you from your humdrum life – even if you are more chained to your desk than ever paying off the blasted thing.

Indeed the main advertising strategy bluntly put is make people feel bad about themselves and then try to sell them an empty solution. When that doesn’t work, you

sell them something else that equally doesn't fill the void you've created. Theologically speaking these people are in the quack miracle business.

So Miracles are not just things that we look for in the pages of the bible – they are the stuff of everyday things. Indeed, they are the things that often keep us going and trying even when our rational brains tell us that there is no logical way that things should happen. I would also argue that one of the greatest acts of faith that occurs each week in the UK is the faithful purchase of lottery tickets each week - just in case the smallest of possible probabilities actually comes through. So what do we make of this feeding miracle we have heard today?

Some of us see this as a magical catering feat - that this account is one that happened completely as it was reported. Jesus is shown as the messiah who can perform miracles at will. Jesus orders the people to stay and sit down on the grass. He then gets to work doing what he has come to do - curing every disease and sickness among the people. He then performs the largest and most impressive miracle of feeding many with very little.

Others see this as more metaphorical. Some focus on the blessing of the loaves and bread and suggest that this miracle is perhaps a foreshadowing of the communion meal. Others focus on the satisfied crowd or the symbolism of the twelve full baskets perhaps representing the 12 tribes being feed by Jesus and going away with abundance. Others see it as the loaves of bread and the fish turning our mind back to the previous parable of the mustard seed. The kingdom produces a plentiful abundance from the smallest of seeds.

Still others do not see this as a miracle at all but make the case that if we are followers of Jesus, we will be compelled to share all we have with each other.

However we interpret this the account, it emphasises that Jesus attends to the physical needs of the people. He does not focus solely on their spiritual health through his teaching. He is also concerned that they are sick. He empathizes with those who are hungry.

I love the miracle stories in the Gospels - they show God at work and to me I'm happy to see them as a mixture of reporting of events and also theological statements of the Kingdom. For me, I'm more than happy to combine all of the above opinions rather than seeing them as an either/or.

So what of miracles today?

I draw the line though of expecting magic happening in my life. I struggle to believe that as a mark of favour God somehow finds me parking spaces, indulges my petty whims or is going to make sure that I am always lucky.

Indeed, one of my pet peeves was triggered a while ago when someone prayed for their parking angel to find them a place. I wanted to scream God isn't your sugar daddy!

I am highly dubious and the good neopuritan that I am looks at these shenanigans with a jaundiced eye- didn't we get rid of relics, masses for the dead, dubious demi-gods otherwise known as saints in the Reformation? I don't believe that the patron saint of toothache sufferers, St Apollonia, a 2nd century Egyptian virgin who was tortured by having her teeth pulled out before leaping to her death in a fire, could really be bothered with a loose filling in 21st century Birmingham.

And while I remember some of the lovely and pious Irish nuns who taught me praying to St Anthony to find something they had lost – I look at it more that they stopped running around and saw the thing they were overlooking.

So how should we treat miracles?

I think sometimes miracles are hawked like a side show carnival. I once went to a church that went from middle of the road to Pentecostal. It suddenly changed when a seemingly middle of the road new minister had an epiphany that led him to become a full-on prophesying and miraculous healer. Each Sunday the ill were healed and prophecy started at precisely 6.30 on a Sunday evening. The people he gathered to him were the people who seemed most needing to be special in some way. Many of us simply muttered in derision and found new churches . I could not as I was in training for ministry at the time so stuck it out. In the end the epiphany passed, and the main ring leaders suddenly left the church and declared that they had become Buddhists.

Now I am not heaping scorn on a Pentecostalism. I can't say it is my cup of tea as an overly repressed intellectual but I am completely respectful that many find meaning and connection with God. Anything that does this should be encouraged. What I am pouring scorn on is the idea that miracles come on demand. My problem with this is several things-

Firstly, I think it is incredibly arrogant to think that God is there to do my bidding. I think I am here to do God's bidding. My life as a disciple is to listen for the whisper of the will of God and do my best to do what I can to obey.

Secondly – what happens when there isn't a miracle? Normally the explanation is that I did not have enough faith. This puts me in a worse position than before because nothing has changed and now I also feel bad about myself or worse I blame others for no miracle happening. I once saw a family abandon their dying 90-year old mother because she didn't have enough faith to get well from terminal cancer – what on earth were they expecting? That good Christians live on earth forever? If so, they were all going to have a rude shock sometime in the future when they notice that there are no eternal people walking on the earth.

Thirdly it cheapens God. Is God like some sort of imp that I summon to do my bidding? Is God some sort of capricious Don Corleone who grants me favours or

whacks me according to his whim and my willingness to indebt myself to him? This is a pagan view of the Gods – not a Christian view of God.

Lastly, I think the expectations of miracles, healings, regular prophecy at a specific weekly slot creates a distorted and transactional view of Christianity that has little to do with discipleship. It creates a void to be filled as much as any advertiser's promise. The payment might be different - unquestioning obedience as well as money, but the emptiness created is the same.

I think miracles are far more amazing things - finding the person you want to spend your life with, holding a baby for the first time, suddenly alighting on unexpected beauty, feeling the unquestioned presence of God for that fleeting moment. Hearing that click when you meet someone who is just going to be a friend. This week a miracle for me was watching Faye and Erica dancing wildly to a hymn I put on.

There is so much that is miraculous in our lives that we need to give thanks for ... let's count them and treasure them. Let's be mindful, grateful and amazed in the wonder of the everyday which is itself a miracle.

Let's realise what miracles are already part of our lives and live in the awe and wonder at the amazing things that are part of our everyday reality. And let's be thankful with what God has filled our lives with, rather than expecting more than everyday magic.

Chris Dowd

Bad Theology Kills