

Wonder Bread

In last week's Gospel we read of the miracle of the loaves and fishes. Today Jesus complains that the crowd did not understand what he had done. "You are not looking for me because you have seen signs, but because you have eaten your fill of the loaves." Well, what was Jesus trying to show?

Our understanding of the miracle is going to depend in part on just what we think the miracle was. As you may recall from previous homilies over the years, I like to think of the multiplication of the loaves not so much in terms of bread appearing out of thin air to a bunch of helpless people who did not think ahead, but of people, many of whom *had* put some bread in their pockets being inspired by the example of a young boy to share what they did have with those around them as well.

Now I have heard this reading disparaged as the "brown bag" interpretation, and dismissed as explaining away the miracle. But "miracle" comes from the Latin *miraculo*, the word for wonder. A miracle is a religious wonder, a sign, as Jesus puts it, some event that exceeds our normal expectations of how things work in the "real" world, something unexpected that snaps our head around and draws our thoughts and feelings towards God. The real wonder here, was not just the sudden abundance of bread, but what that miracle was a sign of...not a full stomach, which will soon become hungry again, but generous hearts, open hearts to last a lifetime.

In fact the miracle is even greater than simply people sharing the bread they had originally brought for themselves. I mean, can you really blame those who hid their bread in their cloaks? By one account there were five thousand hungry people out there in the wilderness who had spent the whole day spellbound by Jesus teaching. If you had been there, and had had the foresight to bring something along to eat, would you want to take it out and risk being pestered by everyone around for a piece? Risk being mobbed and probably robbed of that piece of bread? And afterall, as Andrew had said about the boy's offering of the five loaves and two fish, "What good is that for so many?"

So under the brown bag interpretation the miracle is not even that people shared their bread with those in need around them, but that they were not paralyzed and overwhelmed by the dimensions of that need. The real miracle was that Jesus convinced those who had brought some food, that what little they did have to share *would* make a difference. So perhaps the true miracle is that when only one naive young kid speaks up when the apostles ask for food to distribute, Jesus does not throw up *his* hands, but tells his disciples to begin passing around this ridiculously little bit of food. Then those who already had food may have felt shamed enough to say "None for me, I've got some here I forgot about--or "Oh. Was that what Jesus was asking? I couldn't quite hear what he said. I thought he said blessed are the cheesemakers. But bread, I've got a little bread here" Once Jesus started the ball rolling, people could feel free to eat what they already had and even share some of it without fear of being mobbed. And so those five loaves and two fish managed to be enough for

5,000 people. In fact when the disciples collected the leftover scraps they ended up with more than they started with. That's something that can get you thinking about things. That's a miracle.

We are inclined to think of the "real" world in cynical terms. That it's a jungle out there. That you have to look out for number one. Such cynical "realism" is really self-serving. It's the opposite of religious faith. A miracle is when something good happens that is deemed impossible in the "real" world. For as Jesus repeats over and over, "nothing is impossible with God". Its about faith the size of a mustard seed leading to a bush big enough for the birds of the air to make a home. A faith that can move mountains.

You could even say that the faith that starts the ball rolling is not the crowd's faith in Jesus, but Jesus' faith in the crowds. His refusal to see them in cynical, "realistic" terms, but to have faith in their stepping up when shown how. Its such faith that turns the "real" world into the Kingdom of God, at least for a moment.

On this reading, we too can accomplish miracles-- if we have enough faith in ourselves that the little we can do does matter, which means also having faith enough in others, that they really do want to help too, they're just afraid, or don't know how; which means having faith enough in God that he created people who do want to be kind and generous. Its like our social outreach. We give \$75 a month to our foodbank and to Dawn's autism center. What good is that? We put an Indian untouchable through doctoral studies. Another through law school. And some of you gave a couple of hundred dollars each to put around a dozen others through high school, and business schools. Add in Manoj and his two nephews and together, over the past ten years or so we have helped 15 kids. In a country of over a billion. That is not even a drop in the bucket. But it's a miracle. A miracle that half a world away, somebody even bothers about 15 marginal kids.

We Christians do not live in the real world. We live in a world of wonders, a world of miracles, fueled by faith and by love, and by the example of Christ, who shows us how to make the impossible, possible after all. Tomorrow night we will be screening a movie about miracles, about whether they are still even possible in a cynical America. On whether faith still can make a difference. On what it even means these days to be a saint. Come watch!