

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 9th Sunday after Trinity

28th July 2024

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

A few years ago I had the privilege of sharing in a Eucharist beside Lake Galilee, next to the church said to mark the spot where Jesus fed five thousand from five loaves of bread and two fish. (At the top of your service sheets you will see the mosaic of bread and fish that's set into the floor of the church.) It was a moving service, not least because it connected the story in our Gospel reading with the Eucharist itself. For the two things were, it seems, connected in the mind of the Gospel writers.

In his book *The Meaning in the Miracles*, Jeffrey John (the former Dean of St Alban's and now Assistant Chaplain at St George's, Paris) begins by recalling two Religious Education teachers from his youth, Mr Davies and Miss Tomkins, and their different approaches to teaching the faith. Mr Davies was a literalist, instructing his pupils that the Bible should be taken at its plainest meaning. If it says that Jesus walked on water, then that is what happened. Doubting it effectively meant doubting the divinity of Christ. Miss Tomkins, who had 'Modern Views', was a reductionist, and liked to dismiss anything in the Bible that sounded supernatural. She suggested that when Jesus fed the five thousand, what really happened was that he and the disciples shared their own

loaves and fish with those nearest them; and then others, seeing their example of unselfishness, were inspired to share what they had too, so there was enough for everyone.

Jeffrey John points out that, whilst the two approaches may seem different, both actually treat the miracle stories in a similar way, as though they were straightforward descriptions of what happened. Miss Tomkins looked for worldly explanations, while Mr Davies was happy with supernatural ones. But they were both, in John's view, missing the point, which was that the stories handed down in the Gospels are a literary creation with a theological purpose. At least three of the Gospels were written by Jewish authors, familiar with the literary technique of *Haggadah* (which means narrative). This was a type of creative theological writing that started with a text from Scripture and meditated on it freely, showing how a prophecy was being fulfilled, using symbolism to create a new story that applied to the present day the truths, hopes and meanings of the scriptural past.

Thus, when Jesus walks across water as though on dry land, the hearers were encouraged to think: 'This is the new Moses'. Like Moses, Jesus sits the people down in companies and feeds them with miraculous bread from heaven in such abundance that baskets are left over. (In case the hearers haven't twigged, St John adds: 'Now the Passover was near.' This is a new Exodus.) Jesus's actions also point to Elisha, specifically the story in our Old Testament reading from the Second Book of Kings, when Elisha takes an army of men into the desert and feeds them miraculously with a few loaves. (A clue lies in the word 'barley', which appears only in St John's version, echoing the Elisha story.)

And so, if nothing else, this story is telling us that in recalling what Moses did Jesus is fulfilling the Law, and in recalling what Elisha did Jesus is fulfilling the Prophets. He is the one whom the Law and the Prophets foretold: the long-expected Messiah.

That's one layer of meaning, but there are more. The story presents Jesus as the ultimate fulfilment for humanity, offering a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, the traditional image of paradise. There's also a symbolic layer: bread was often a symbol for the word of God, and there is symbolism in the numbers – twelve baskets for the twelve tribes. Then there's a sacramental layer: early Christians hearing this story would have spotted references to their new eucharistic worship. In the miracle Jesus takes bread, blesses it and breaks it - just like at the Last Supper, just like they were learning to do each week.

All these dimensions of meaning were important to the Gospel writers, and they are important to us as we travel our journey of faith. Hearing the miracles of feeding and healing opens us up to the abundant, healing power of God. Learning what it means to be more open to the world, to one another and to God. Rowan Williams notes that 'Jesus's "works of power" were always means of announcing the good news of his transforming love'.

John's Gospel emphasises how Jesus transforms the people he meets, introducing them to the spiritual dimension of their lives, drawing them from self-centred fearfulness to the reckless abandon of loving one another. 'I came that they may have life,' says Jesus, 'and have it abundantly' (John 10.10). When the wine runs out at the wedding of Cana, Jesus asks the stewards to bring what they have – simple water, like the five loaves and two fish – and he transforms

it, way beyond what they need. We are to bring to Christ what we have, our selves, and allow him to transform them, so that our lives may be broken open and shared, that through us people may catch a glimpse of God's unbounded love, the living water that gushes up to eternal life. Our instinctive fear of scarcity overwhelmed by God's abundant generosity. Five thousand pieces of bread on the mountainside. Six hundred bottles of fine wine at a village wedding. Do this in remembrance of me.

Perhaps, in the end, the thing about the miracle stories is that expand our understanding of what is possible. As the angel said to Mary, nothing is impossible with God. Yet there is double agency involved. God needs our response. Without Mary's 'yes', none of it could have happened. Without the boy's bread and fish, five thousand would not have been fed. Unless the stewards had brought the water, there would never have been wine. However small or useless we feel our contribution to be, we must never underestimate what it can do. Small acts of kindness and generosity can transform another person's life. What matters is not what we are, but rather what by God's grace we may become. It's never too late to begin.

While I was reflecting on all this, I came across this prayer. It's called 'A shocking blessing':

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers,
half truths, superficial relationships,
so that you will live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice,
oppression and exploitation of people,
so that you will work for justice, equity and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war.
so that you will reach out your hand to comfort them and change their pain to joy.

And may God bless you with the foolishness to think that you can make a difference in the world,
so that you will do the things which others tell you cannot be done.

The miracle is that they can.

Amen.