

Feeding the Five Thousand/Walking on Water



John 6:13 "So (the disciples) gathered (the fragments) up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that (Jesus) had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'"

In today's single Gospel reading we hear both the beloved story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand and of Jesus Walking on Water. These are perhaps two of the most famous of Jesus' "miracles", or are they? As you may know, some Christians flatly dismiss any talk of supernatural events that defy the laws of nature. Meanwhile other Christians are mesmerized by the miracles, deriding the faith of those who don't believe in them. So, what's a good Christian to do? How are we to understand

these stories? And are we reading into them what we want to be there, and seeing in them only what we want to find?

The Gospel of John offers the most interesting interpretation of these two beloved stories that are mentioned elsewhere in the other Gospels. Remember in John's Gospel, Jesus cleanses the Temple and chases the moneychangers out with whips at the very beginning of his ministry in the second chapter of John (Jn. 2.13ff). This was seen by many as a prophetic acting out of John the Baptist's proclamation that the Temple was defiled by a brood of vipers. Then in the third chapter, Jesus is pictured baptizing alongside of John the Baptist (Jn. 3.2-27), where it was reported that "all were going to him." In both Matthew and Mark's Gospels, John the Baptist is arrested and beheaded just before the Story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. In the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John, we are told that "When Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was making and baptizing more disciples than John . . . he left Judea and departed again to Galilee (Jn. 4.1). "So, when Jesus came to Galilee, "the Galileans welcomed him," we are told, "having seen all that he had done in Jerusalem at the feast" (Jn. 4.45). According to Mark's account, "they were (now) like sheep without a shepherd and (Jesus) began to teach them many things" (Mk. 6.34). There follows the familiar story of the feeding of the five thousand.

"When (Jesus) looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?'. . . Philip answered him, 'Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' (Then) One of (Jesus') disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?'" Now it is interesting to note that one interpretation of this story is that all or most of the people there actually had something with them to eat, but they had selfishly not brought it out into the open for fear that they would then have to share it with all the others and that there would then not be enough to go around. In this interpretation, the willingness of Jesus and his disciples to share the young boy's five loaves and two fishes among so many thousands moved the others to bring out their supplies as well, and as a result all thus ate and were satisfied and there was food aplenty. This is a particularly telling account of the story if one remembers that when the crowds on the banks of the Jordan River earlier asked John the Baptist "What then shall we do (to be bearing good fruit worthy of repentance)?" (Lk. 3.10). John the Baptist replied, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise." Thus, Jesus appears again to be prophetically acting out John's message, bringing it to fulfillment, making it happen. It is

somewhat miraculous in this interpretation that the crowd's hearts were so changed, and they were suddenly inspired by Jesus' actions and willing to be vulnerable and to share their food, unsure whether there would be enough to go around, when in fact there was enough to go around, and more than twelve baskets were left over. Perhaps it is no wonder that the Gospel of John then records that "When the people saw the sign that (Jesus) had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.' And when Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to anoint him (as the Messiah), he withdrew again to the mountain by himself." (Jn. 6:14-5). Meanwhile, Jesus sent his disciples on ahead of him to Capernaum.

Now there is no real mountain in that area around the Sea of Galilee, so the writer may have meant the highlands on the north side of the lake. As the night wore on, Jesus may have begun to walk in the moonlight around the lake towards Capernaum to catch up with the disciples the next morning. As Jesus traversed the high ground at the north end of the Sea of Galilee, he may have even seen the disciples' boat below on the lake being battered by the waves. We are told that a strong wind was blowing against them, and they had been rowing for some time according to the Gospel of John's account but had only

progressed some three or four miles. And usually in a storm, sailors hug the coastline.

In verses 19 today, we read that the disciples saw Jesus walking "on" the sea. The key word here in Greek (ἐπί) can be translated either as walking "on top of the sea" or just as easily as walking "towards the sea" or even "by the sea." I remember in my Greek class in college, that the context determined how you translate such prepositions. Accordingly, one interpretation suggests only that Jesus was simply walking along the shore. According to this interpretation, the disciples looked up and unexpectedly saw Jesus in the moonlight walking along the water's edge, where he came upon them so suddenly that they were terrified and thought he was a ghost. But immediately (Jesus) spoke to them, saying "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid. . ." And he got into the boat with them and in John's Gospel account, the story then continues the verse with: "and *immediately* the boat reached the land toward which they were going" (Jn. 6:21) suggesting the boat was very close already to shore, and that Jesus was not out there walking the middle of the Sea of Galilee, which is how this is so often portrayed. Both Matthew's and Mark's accounts of this story specifically record "that the wind was against (the disciples in the boat)" (Mt. 14.24, Mk. 6.48). And Mark's account notes that "(Jesus) meant to pass by them," (Mk. 6.48) but when the disciples saw

him and called out, he responded. Now Matthew's Gospel has a tendency again and again to add details in his stories about the apostle Peter, and so in Matthew's account, when Jesus reassures the frightened disciples that "it is I," Peter wants proof that it is really him and not a ghost, and says, "Lord, if it is you, bid me come to you" (Mt. 14.26-33). And Jesus said, "Come," and at once and impulsively Peter got out of the boat and struggled through the waves and began to sink, cried out for help, and Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" What Peter was doubting, according to the Gospel account, was that it was really Jesus that they saw and not a "ghost," and not necessarily that Jesus was miraculously walking on the water, as we so often assume. "If it is (really) you Lord, bid me come to you," Jesus reached out his hand and caught him, and they got into the boat together, "and *immediately* the boat reached the land toward which they were going" (Jn. 6:21) suggesting it was very close to the shore already.

The truth is that both of these two narratives which I have presented are a perfectly possible interpretation of our so-called 'miracle' stories today. None of the Gospel writers actually uses the word "miracle" in relation to either of these stories, that's a modern interpretation. John's Gospel notes that the Feeding of the Five Thousand was literally "a sign"

that Jesus was the prophet who was to come into the world, and so the crowd sought to take Jesus by force and make him king, so Jesus withdrew to the mountain by himself. Thus, both of these interpretations which I have presented are acceptable literal readings of the biblical text. What bothers me most is how much of our attention to these stories is usually focused on which version is the "true" or "right" or historically "correct" one, so much so that we sometimes miss out on the real significance of the stories. For whichever interpretation one takes, the meaning of the story remains the same, that in the hour of need, Jesus came to the help of the disciples. When they were hungry, they were fed; and when the wind was contrary and they were caught in a storm, Jesus was there for them. No sooner has a need arisen than Jesus was there to save, and the disciples (like us so often) were disbelieving or distrusting at the time. That is the real point of these Gospel stories is in the interaction between Jesus and his disciples, and it is one that relates more clearly to our lives and our struggles than whether Jesus could or could not miraculously divide the loaves or walk on water. But that point is so often missed. And I do so often wonder why it is that we are so much more willing to focus on the matters of fact in the story, than on the matters of faith? Think about it.