

All four Gospels, Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, record the miracle of the feeding of the 5000. In the account of John, we are told that, having crossed the Sea of Galilee, Jesus journeyed up a mountain and sat down with His disciples. It was near the time of Passover. A large crowd had followed them. Jesus asked Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people?' Philip replied, 'Six months' wages would not buy enough food for each of them to get a little'. It is Andrew, through the gift of a little boy, who provides five barley loaves and two fish. Jesus asked the people to sit down. We are told that where they sat there was a great deal of grass. He took the loaves, gave thanks and distributed them to the vast crowd; each ate as much as they wanted. At the end, twelve filled baskets were left over. We are told. "When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say. "This is indeed the prophet who is come into the world'." There is a miracle here no doubt, but what is the miracle? This story has been included by all four evangelists, so it is important but what is the miracle?

After the apostle Paul, perhaps the most significant writer in the Christian tradition is the fourth/fifth century African bishop, theologian and mystic, Augustine of Hippo. Ordained a priest in 391AD in what is modern-day Algeria, Augustine's work continues to influence and shape the worldwide church today. Writing in the late fourth century, Augustine commented that hearers of the Gospel frequently got stuck on the 'wonder' aspect of miracles and in debates as to whether such things could ever have happened. A Doctor of the Church, Augustine wrote:

Let us ask the miracles themselves what they tell us about Christ, for they have a tongue of their own, if it can only be understood. Because Christ is the Word of God, all the acts of the Word become words to us. The miracle which we admire on the outside also has something inside which must be understood. If we see a piece of beautiful handwriting, we are not satisfied simply to note that the letters are formed evenly, equally and elegantly; we also want to know the meaning the letters convey. In the same way a miracle is not like a picture, something merely to look at and admire, and to be left at that. It is much more like a piece of writing which we must learn to read and understand.

Augustine compared miracles to beautiful handwriting: we want to understand its depth, and not be content with its elegant form. What is the inner meaning of the miracle of the feeding of the 5000?

Many of the stories in the Gospels have been inspired and shaped by stories of the *Tanakh*, our Old Testament. *Midrash* is a Jewish genre of reimagining and re-writing stories in the *Tanakh*. The evangelists, the early Church, used this way of writing to tell the story of Jesus to a largely Jewish audience. If, as a first century Jew, you heard the story of the feeding of the 5000, what would you hear? Details in this genre are almost never incidental. What would you hear? You would hear resounding echoes of the Exodus.

The first detail we are given is that Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee. Moses crossed the Red Sea or Sea of Reeds. In the account of Mark and Matthew, having crossed the sea, Jesus entered a desert place. In the Exodus story, in the desert place the people are fed by bread, by manna, from heaven and, in both stories, there are basketfuls of leftovers. The evangelists want us to see Jesus as the new Moses, the Lawgiver.

Did you notice that that John tells us that there was grass where the people sat down? Think about that: we are looking at a miracle of feeding 5000 people and the evangelist told us there was grass on the mountain. The evangelist Mark tells us that the grass was green.

This is not incidental. The green grass suggests it was the Jewish month of Abib, which is the time of Passover. John explicitly tells us that it is near Passover time in another allusion to the Exodus.

As a first century Jew, you would also hear clear echoes from Second Kings in which the prophet Elisha fed the people with twenty loaves of barley. Like Philip to Jesus, a servant of Elisha said that the loaves would not be nearly enough food. Elisha replied, 'Give it to the people and let them eat.....They shall eat and have some left'. The evangelists want us to see Jesus as a prophet, a prophet like Elisha. In the Gospels, it is not long after the account of the feeding of the 5000 that we are told the story of the Transfiguration, a story in which, in a mystical vision, Jesus stood alongside Moses and the prophet Elijah.

In the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, there is a near identical story told of the feeding of the 4000. The first story is set in Jewish region near Galilee while the second is set in the Gentile region of the Decapolis. Taken together, these stories portray the feeding of Jew and Gentile; to use St Paul's phrase, 'Jew first, and then Greek'.

The fourth evangelist declares Jesus to be a prophet, the one who is to come into the world, but when does the evangelist say that? It is not after the 5000 are fed. There is a sign but it is not the feeding of the 5000. The sign is that after all had eaten, there were 12 baskets leftover. In the feeding of the 4000, there are 7 baskets leftover. These numbers are not incidental. 12 represents the 12 tribes of Israel, while 7 is the perfect number meaning fullness, completion. The five loaves suggest the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Torah. The number 4 suggests the 4 beasts in the Book of Daniel: in their history the Hebrew people had been overrun by 4 Gentile empires.

As we piece together this beautiful handwriting, to use Augustine's metaphor, we are ready to understand the depths in the story, the miracle on the mountainside. In penetrating Scripture written in the Jewish mindset, it is important to hear what a first century Jew would hear. In the past, many in the Church have either focused too narrowly on the wonder of the miracle, the supernatural event; or, in order to avoid the 'embarrassment' of the supernatural, the liberal wing of the Church has preferred an interpretation of justice or sharing or personal generosity. There is far more to it than that.

In the rabbinic tradition manna is a symbol of God's word. In Deuteronomy, Moses told the people that they were fed manna so that they would understand that they did not live by bread alone. In the Gospel of John, Jesus, *Jeshua*, is the Bread of Life. The eloquent handwriting of John, narrating the feeding of the 5000, is a story about illuminating faith, about feeding on Christ. For the early Church, as for us, Jesus is the Word of God, the Wisdom of God, the essence of God and, spiritually, we are to feed on Him. We cannot live by bread alone. This world will never satisfy the hunger of the soul.

The story in John also has Eucharistic overtones: Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks and distributed them among the people. The Eucharist is union with God, a window opened into that which lies beyond space and time; it is intimacy with the Highest. In the Eucharist, through prayers and sacred songs, heaven and earth are bound together. The miracle on the mountainside happens every time we receive Bread from the hand of Jesus and every time we feed on the words of Jesus, the Word of Life. The miracle is not history; it is today. Amen.