

Those who ate were about 5000 men, besides women and children (Mat 14,21, 2nd August)

This week Jesus feeds the five thousand, next week he walks on water. What do we make of Jesus? Was he real? Is the gospel exaggeration, and therefore unbelievable? Did he perform miracles?

I want to build up to this slowly. I want to begin with the strangest thing of all. The strangest thing of all is, that 51 years after humans landed on the moon; in the age of science, of the internet, people still gather in church Sunday by Sunday. Not just people who cannot leave the past behind, but new people; intelligent people; some of them are even scientists; some of those people are here today; people whose secular life left certain things unexplained and unsatisfied. These people think it is important, maybe the most important thing of all, to re-enact the fellowship meals of Jesus: his meals with tax collectors and sinners; the feeding of the 5000; especially the last supper, in which the soon to be murdered Jesus offers his violated and resurrected body as our daily bread. 'Give us this day our daily bread.'

Why do you come? I want to tell you why you come. Your mind does not quite know the answer. It was not your mind that brought you here. Your feet brought you here. That is, something much deeper and more earthed than your conscious mind brought you here. Your feet.

So, the first miracle is that we still gather to 'do this in memory of me'. What is the second miracle? The second miracle is that Jesus really did rise from the dead and therefore he is here. How can I say this? The earliest documents of the New Testament were written by Paul and Mark, very few years after the Resurrection, while many of its witnesses were still alive. They tell us that the runaway disciples were preaching boldly that Jesus is alive and there is nothing to fear within three days of his death. They changed, suddenly and dramatically.

Having said that, it might seem strange to you that I am now going to be much more cautious about the historical reality of the feeding of the 5000 and the walking on water. Sceptics will say that the Resurrection is just as unbelievable as the other miracles. Indeed, it is, except that the evidence is so strong. The gospel really did spread like wildfire out of the crucifixion.

So, the feeding of 5000 people and the walking on water. Exceedingly difficult to believe. Do we have to believe them? Well, there are a few things I would like to say here. The question is for me, not are they true? But, in what way are they true? My friend, Ashley, with whom Cyrus and I are studying Mark's gospel, noticed that both these stories are suspiciously like 2 stories in the Old Testament. The Resurrection, incidentally, is like nothing in the Old Testament. Despite attempts the gospel writers make to claim it was predicted, it really come from nowhere. I.e. it happened. But the feeding of the five thousand. Did not God feed a huge crowd of Israelites every day they were crossing the wilderness with miraculous food, mana, literally translated 'what is it'? And the walking on the water. Did not the Spirit of God hover over the face of the waters as he was creating the world in Genesis chapter 1? Everywhere, the gospel writers are trying to rewrite the story of the Old Testament, because

their story is about how Jesus completely renewed what was begun, but without him could not be finished. So, either, Jesus re-enacted the Old Testament stories himself because he was the one to restore all things, or perhaps, the gospel writers have to have him do these things, because there is no other way to make sense of who they found him to be. Or is it a bit of both?

I remember once sitting at nightfall on a rock on a deserted beach overlooking the sea in Corfu. A storm arose very suddenly. Although I was getting wet, I was not cold, and I was so enthralled by the storm that I did not leave. In a way, I saw Jesus walk over the water towards me. Of course, this was not literally true. Nobody else could have seen him. Nor was it untrue. In a way, there is such a thing that I would call deep truth.

I want to end with a quotation from a book I have just finished:

‘Who is Mozart? Is it the Mr Mozart of his biography, whose psychoanalyst would have understood him? Or is he the Mozart of the Magic Flute, the concertos, the symphonies? It is those who listen to Mozart and commune with him who know who Mozart is.

The supreme case is Jesus. Who is the I who dares to say, ‘I am the truth’? Not Mr Jesus – but the one who is in him himself more than himself’.

That is why the people whose feet drag them to church in midlife are so exciting. Now, you may not put it like this, but it is the one in you that is you but is more than you that has brought you here.

‘All ate and were filled. And those who ate were about 5000 men besides women and children’. Amen.