

Pentecost 9
6/8/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 55:1-5

Psalm 145

Matthew 14:13-21

The parable of the feeding of the 5000

Over the last couple of weeks we have been looking at some of the parables of Jesus. This we have done not so much in terms of their specific content but in terms of their *character* as parables, considering the significance of the fact that Jesus privileged parables in his proclamation of the kingdom.

Today we come to a miracle story. Or, at least, that is how we are likely to understand what we have heard – as a “miracle story”. But I want to challenge this characterisation and the problems it raises thus: if Jesus privileged the parable in his proclamation of the kingdom, and if the feeding of the 5000 is itself a kind of proclamation of the kingdom, is there not a sense in which the miracles are parables and the parables are miracles?

The purpose here is to ask about our different responses to these apparently different kinds of texts. For the most part we are happy with the parables, – if sometimes a little mystified. Very many of us, however, have no idea what to do with the “unscientific” nature of a miracle story.

And yet, these apparently different kinds of texts are part of a whole, and it is this unity which invites the question, Are the miracles parables and the parables miracles?

The danger here is that what I’m going to suggest may sound like an “explaining away” of the miracle, so that we don’t have to believe that “it really happened.” Yet this is not my intention at all. If anything is going to be “explained away”, it will be the nervous twitch or allergic reaction in the face of the bald miracle story. This is the urgent need somehow to *get around* the miracle, in the absence any urgency to do the same when it comes to the parables. The miracle stories bother us so much more than the parables. Yet in this way we filter or strain the biblical text, despite the whole of it being a pointer to the nearness of the kingdom of God in the presence of Jesus.

Now, of course, parables *per se* are *not* miracles, and neither are miracles parables; we distinguish different types of things with these labels. Yet in the Scriptures these different things have an important mutuality. Without the shock to the senses of the miracles, the parables are rather folksy, take-it-or-leave-it images, the starkness of which is easily lost against the sheer familiarity of the images. Hearing the parables in the sight of the miracles sharpens the images. On the other hand, the miracles are mute and ambiguous without the parables. A curious thing about the account of the feeding of the 5000 is that it doesn’t actually tell us what we are to do with it, which is also the case with just about every other miracle story in the Scriptures. There is no “believe this” – that I did it – or “do this” – as I have done – or “watch for this” – so you’ll know when I’m around. There is just the story, and the narrative moves on. “What we are to do” with the miracles is given in other elements of the gospel, including the parables. It is these things which make the miracles “about” the kingdom of God.

With this in mind, perhaps we can now shift gear a bit to look at the today's particular story more closely, less distracted by the miracle itself. In the middle of the story there is an exchange between Jesus and his disciples about who will feed the masses. "You give them something to eat", Jesus tells the disciples.

How are we to read this? The standard reading is that here the disciples fail a test. And they do. But what *is* the test? Again, the standard reading is that they did not have "enough faith" to do what Jesus then had to do in their stead.

But this doesn't ring true with the Scriptural understanding of who does what in the kingdom of heaven. For a contrast with the disciples here, we might jump gospels and watch what happens in Cana when the wine runs out. That quintessential disciple, Mary, nudges Jesus and whispers, "They're out of wine" and then tells the servants, "Do whatever he says". Problem solved.

If the disciples fail a test in our story this morning, it is not that they didn't have enough "faith" to feed 5000 people, it's that they didn't see that the test was whether they would defer to him and respond immediately, "Here you are Jesus, we can toss in a few loaves and a couple of fish."

The work of the miracles is to communicate that the world of the parables can only be realised by God. Or, put differently, the parables tell of the miraculous nature of God's reign.

What does this mean for anything?

It means that all of our great efforts – our food programs, our education programs, our asylum work, our pastoral visitation, our careful budgeting, our mission planning and our buildings strategies – these things are but a few loaves and a couple of fish to be presented and accompanied with the words, Here you are Jesus.

The miracle is that *this is enough*. In the hands of this God, the *one* pearl, the *insignificant* yeast, the *tiny* seed is enough. These familiar miracles point to the unfamiliar ones, and the other way around. This is what it looks like for God's kingdom to come, on earth as in heaven.

At the heart of our confession is a single parable: "A man of faith walks a path to a cross." This one parable is met with a single miracle – "A condemned man is raised to life". Or is it the other way around, that the raising of the condemned man is the parable, and the steady path to the cross is the miracle?

The point is that we don't get the familiar miracle without the unfamiliar one, we don't get the parables without the miracles. We don't get the familiar cross without the unfamiliar resurrection or the resurrection without the cross; we don't get the familiar Jesus without the unfamiliar God, or God without Jesus; we don't get our familiar selves without the unfamiliar Jesus, or Jesus without ourselves; we don't get familiar works without unfamiliar grace, or grace without works; we don't get the familiar body without Spirit, or Spirit without the body; we don't get the familiar creation without the unfamiliar consummation, or the consummation without creation.

What we know in the parables and do not know in the miracles lean in toward each other, fill each other up, and then spill out into "more."

When the kingdom of this God draws near, everything becomes a parable, and everything a miracle – even us with our hesitations and anxieties, our lack of faith or vision, our fears and our graspings after empty hopes. Then according to the word of the prophet, we will be fed with bread which satisfies (Isaiah 55.1,2).

It is given to us, then, to pray that, in parable and in miracle, God's kingdom come that earth might be as heaven, that God might open his hand so that the desires of every living thing be satisfied (Psalm 145.16).

Let us, then, pray.
