

Sunday between 24th and 30th July [17]

John 6:1-21

Let's begin with a dictionary definition of the word miracle.

1. an effect or extraordinary event in the physical world that surpasses all known human or natural powers and is ascribed to a supernatural cause.
2. such an effect or event manifesting or considered as a work of God.
3. a wonder; marvel.
4. a wonderful or surpassing example of some quality: a miracle of modern acoustics.

We use the word all of the time and advertisers make claims of miraculous results of all sorts of everyday products found on supermarket shelves, but let's get back to basics, back to those first 2 definitions of miracle;

1. an effect or extraordinary event in the physical world that surpasses all known human or natural powers and is ascribed to a supernatural cause.
2. such an effect or event manifesting or considered as a work of God.

That is what we are faced with today in scripture. We are told the story of God's own messiah feeding to satisfaction and beyond large numbers of people with a tiny amount of food. The food in question is not the type of food that marketing slogan makers would describe as a miracle food, there was nothing special about the bread or the fish, the food was ordinary. But what happened to the food was an event in the physical world that surpassed all known human or natural powers, and the supernatural cause this event was attributed to was God.

This is not a trick of the writer, or something that can be misunderstood. Imagine the scene from the gospel for a second the packed lunch for one small boy, even if he was a big eater, is never going to be enormous but let's take a moment and think of 5 loaves of bread in the supermarket. Add to that 2 fish, they can't be ridiculously big fish like sharks, I know we might eat them for our lunch but this boy carried his meal so nothing ridiculously big for our imagined meal please. Then imagine 12 large baskets, large is a subjective term but let's say the size of a wastepaper basket or bucket, that would be reasonable. By any reasonable reckoning we can fit all of the lunch quite comfortably in half of the baskets, but we are told after 5000 men and their families had eaten their fill the 12 baskets were full of leftovers.

Now that is hard to believe, but that's why it's a miracle it's an effect or extraordinary event in the physical world that surpasses all known human or natural powers and is ascribed to a supernatural cause. But we still find it hard to believe, well of course, it's supposed to be unbelievable, it's not normal, or reasonable and it was so noteworthy it made it into each one of the 4 gospel accounts of Jesus, it took the disciples by surprise too. They had no idea Jesus could feed that many people, they were telling him as much when the idea first came up. They watched him take 5 loaves of bread (which, in reality, scholars suspect were no more than 5 bread rolls really) and 2 fish and bless them and distribute them among the people. We don't know if they physically multiplied in his hands until there were thousands of loaves

and fish, or if the seemingly small amount, when passed around just never ran out and the only evidence of its multiplication was at the end when the crumbs amounted to 12 baskets of leftovers. However it looked, the effect was the same, the impossible occurred and there were thousands of witnesses to the event. Think about that for a minute, if this hadn't really happened and it had been written about in the gospels, don't you think that someone who was there would have disputed the events? There was enough motivation to disprove the teachings of the Christians, anyone who could would have been rewarded by the Jewish authorities and the Romans, so we can only assume that there was no one to speak against this event.

This is not a metaphor or a parable, this is a biographical account of an event in the life of Jesus. It's really important to spell that out because we live in a cynical society. We trust no one, and sometimes for good reason, politicians have earned their reputation for regularly being dishonest with their policies or their expenses or their relationships, and these are the best people we can find to lead us. Scandals in church leadership mean that our leaders can no longer, on behalf of the church, speak with moral authority to the wider community because they are not automatically trustworthy just because the church vouches for them.

We are unable to trust for many good reasons, and we are conditioned to cynicism. But this account of a physical miracle holds up to all kinds of scrutiny. It's not the only miracle of its kind performed by Jesus either, he also fed 4000 people with seven loaves of bread on another occasion, that time with 7 large baskets of leftovers. No one can tell you how he did it because it was not a magic trick, but a miracle from God. And if we can trust the accounts of Jesus' miracles we can trust the accounts of Jesus as healer and teacher and preacher and pastor.

If we are going to be cynical about the world and its leadership, that is fine, our leaders should be held to account and live up to high expectations, but we need not lose ourselves to the cynicism and become hopeless as we face the future. We have a leader in whom we can put our trust, Jesus Christ, God's chosen and indeed God incarnate, God in flesh.

When the world is a cruel place we can look to Jesus for the example of kindness as he took pity on those in need. When the world is a mean place and we have little, we can look to Jesus for the example of generosity that fed 5000 families to beyond their satisfaction. When we live through stormy times in our relationships, our work, our neighbourhoods, our families, our finances, we can look to Jesus who spoke to the raging seas and it was stilled. Here is one in whom there is no cynicism and towards whom we need not feel any cynicism.

That he loves us just as we are is unbelievable at times when we cannot love ourselves, that he loves others around us is unbelievable when we cannot see any good in them. But achieving unbelievable things is what Jesus does. We can look to the example of the Lord and live in his ways and achieve the seemingly impossible. We can bear the fruits of the spirit of kindness and generosity and peace, we can love those who are difficult to love, even those who hate us. Under our own power, perhaps not, but with God anything is possible.