

ST GEORGE'S WINDSOR
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Trinity 8

There are some people who think that reading the New Testament is rather like studying a motorcar manual or even a telephone directory; something you do in order to be sure of a whole lot of facts.

Well of course, the New Testament is full of 'facts'; only the most eccentric commentator could deny that. Nevertheless, only the most unimaginative reader would deny that there is much, much more than facts alone.

In order to 'hear' the New Testament, it is necessary to understand that its language is often wonderfully 'allusive' language; full of resonances.

Reading the New Testament can be like listening to a symphony, in the course of which you 'pick up' certain themes that are repeated or, you might say, 'echoed'. Or reading the New Testament can be like reading a poem, in the course of which it is what is 'hinted at', rather than what is explicitly stated, that turns out to be most meaningful..

Let us take as an example today's passage from the Gospel of St Matthew. In it, we heard recited the familiar account of the miracle of the Feeding of the Five Thousand.

This 'miracle' is recorded in all four Gospels. It was obviously treasured by, and shared amongst, the earliest Christian communities.

Jesus, who had sought solitude in a deserted place, had discovered crowds of people already there, looking for him. Out of compassion for them, he healed those who were sick. Then, out of the same compassion, he provided food for them; those who, as evening came, were hungry.

We need not doubt that something remembered later to have been miraculous occurred; that a 'fact' lies at the heart of this account. But I wonder what else was in the minds of those who wrote about it, recorded it, or first read about it?

I suppose, as they thought of Jesus in the desert providing food for his followers, there would have been those who sensed some parallel with the story of Moses and the Manna in the Wilderness; of God's providing, long ago, sustenance for His people. Was Jesus to be understood as the new Moses? Is it that which was conveyed?

Others perhaps would have thought more of what is called the 'Messianic Banquet', alluded to in the passage from Isaiah that we heard earlier. This was the imagined celebratory feast which would, at the end of the ages, mark the victory of God and His chosen people. Was this miracle in the desert and on the mountainside meant to be a foretaste of the festival; an indication that the time was near?

There would also have been those however who, in addition to these echoes from the Old Testament, would have been surprised and startled by the words: "He looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds".

As they read, or heard read, the Gospel narrative of the Feeding of the Multitude, they would have interpreted it as a prelude to, a kind of preview of, the Last Supper, at which Jesus performed the same actions and spoke the same words.

As in that desolate place, out of love, Jesus had fed the hungry crowds so, in time to come, he would feed his disciples with broken bread; a token of his broken body that would signify his sacrificial love by which his followers were to be fed, nourished, inspired and reassured throughout the ages. Whether we know it as the Lord's Supper, the Holy Communion, the Eucharist or whatever, this source of nourishment, this spiritual 'feeding', has been essential to most Christian pilgrims for the last two thousand years.

So 'significant', in the true sense of the word, has been this feeding with these symbols of Christ's love, that some of his followers have come to The Lord's Table only rarely, and after serious preparation. Others, similarly acknowledging its importance, have looked for frequent, even daily, satisfaction. Whatever is the case, I am reminded of the well-known words of Dom Gregory Dix in his writing on the Liturgy:

"Jesus told his friends to do this, and they have done it always since. Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country among every race of earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacles of earthly greatness to the refuges of fugitives in caves and dens of the earth. People have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; for the wisdom of a Parliament or for a sick old person afraid to die.....One could fill many pages with the reasons why people have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them. And best of all, week by week and month by

month, on a hundred successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this just to make the 'plebs sancta dei' – the holy common people of God."

So it is that, in the Feeding of the Five Thousand, perhaps we glimpse a foreshadowing of that 'feeding' that has sustained Christian people in so many different circumstances throughout the centuries. That broken bread, once distributed in the desert and on the mountainside, was to become the 'outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace' that is none other than the assurance of the love of God for each and every one of us revealed in and through the cross of Jesus Christ.

In case you should think that I am waving a kind of 'high church' banner in my drawing your attention to the importance of the Holy Communion, allow me to finish with the words of the first verse of a hymn by the 18th/19th century writer Josiah Conder. Conder was a non-conformist. His words remind us that the 'command' of Jesus has been heard by Christians of all sorts and at all times.

"Bread of heaven, on thee we feed,
For thy flesh is meat indeed;
Ever may our souls be fed
With this true and living bread,
Day by day with strength supplied
Through the life of him who died."

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