

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME; 2020.

There are only two miracles that are reported in all four Gospels, they are the Resurrection, that would seem fairly obvious and then there is the not so obvious, the miracle of the loaves and the fishes. In fact the miracle of the multiplication in some form is mentioned in six different places in the Gospel. The fact that it is given such a high prominence in the recorded events of the life of Jesus and in the early church accounts of His ministry, points to the enormous impact that episode had on an awful lot of people, but you wouldn't think so if were to examine some of the explanations that not only the sceptical reader often gives for this miracle but also a great many progressive Christians as well.

Rather than concede that Jesus performed an action that was consistent with Him being truly God as well as truly man, who brought the heavens and the earth into being and holds the whole of existence in his redeeming and sustaining hands, there are some who would prefer to rob the incident of its supernatural nature and say that what really happened was Jesus encouraged, either through the use of the boy who brought the loaves and fishes as one account describes, or through the example of sharing, a sort of bring and share supper, even an argument towards some kind of Marxist philosophy, some kind of false utopianism where everybody gets an equal slice of the cake, or in this instance the right amount of bread and fish. Others say the story never really existed or if it did it was embellished to bring out a theological meaning that pointed to the Eucharist. It is in fact a very good story to draw out a deeper meaning of the Eucharist as well as several Old Testament exodus stories concerning the Manna in the desert, but that does not detract from the incident being miraculous and historical.

Explanations that strip out the sacred in a story of the loaves and fishes is capable of then stripping out the sacred and indeed the supernatural from everything else in the History of God's activity with the world. This is indeed the case where scripture grasps the truth of the matter, for we are told by St Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians to "look not at the things that are seen, but at the things that are not seen; for the things that are seen are temporal, but the things that are not seen are internal. C.S.Lewis echoing sound and faithful creedal theology sees the Incarnation, God becoming man,

as the Grand Miracle for which every miracle had prepared for, or exhibits, or results from. So it follows that those who deny such things as the miraculous and would rather explain them away, usually abandon other doctrines of the church and even more terrifyingly when the sacred is stripped out of the human experience than human life itself is at risk because it becomes dispensable. Without the sense of the sacred the disciples would have sent the hungry people away, without the sense of the sacred, society enables life to be seen as cheap, think about the culture of death that surrounds abortion and euthanasia. It is the thin end of the wedge.

Jesus is the totality of what is utterly sacred. In His divinity he shows us something of a completely different order, a reality that does not belong in this world. But he does so in the fullness of his humanity, in an object that is utterly integral to this world. The manifestation of the sacred, that is, something beyond this world shows itself in or through an object that is of this world. And in the activity of Jesus, throughout his ministry he is forever bringing about experiences and breaking or interrupting life, if you like, by revealing that all can be sacred.

There is also a sense that many are highly embarrassed about even acknowledging that miracles can even occur and that can be traced back to the loss of what we can call the supernatural aspect of our faith. Again, to lose sight of the supernatural is to stray dangerously close to the heresy of Arianism, that is, to say Jesus was fully human and did not have a fully divine nature as well. In this scenario, Jesus' miracles are no more than just sleight of hand and a magicians act.

God descends into the experience of a broken and divided world, dislocated from the divine and from itself, in order to bring it back again into the Kingdom, which he accomplishes in the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Isn't it more than probable that at moments in His ministry the Kingdom would come flooding through, and raise creation up at that moment, prior to its final consummation; a foretaste of the type of life that waits us all?

This is what St Augustine was trying to explain in order to justify the miraculous without falling into the trap of making God arbitrary. For in order to proclaim a rational faith we still need to be able to give an account or at least say

something meaningful as to why miracles occur for some and not for others. This is particularly difficult for we are dealing with an awful lot of unknowable factors, and caution and sensitivity must always be exercised. St Augustine saw the miraculous as natural processes just speeded up a bit. Rowan Williams takes up this theme of St Augustine and adds that what can make the natural processes speed up a bit is the presence of an especially holy life. It is this sort of life that gives access to the sacred through a life of holy living, one that imitates the life of Christ, that allows the Kingdom to flow through just that little bit more. That doesn't mean of course that where miracles are prayed for and don't seem to happen, that those lives are any less holy or less deserving. It might mean, when all the facts are known, and in the end that can only be known by God, that for some, rather than just a foretaste of the life to come through the momentary miraculous event, the whole of the kingdom awaits. I am thinking primarily at this point where people pray for a miracle in the face of extreme illness.

WE associate holy lives of course with that vast body of men and women, that great cloud of witnesses that we know to be Saints. When the Roman Catholic Church investigates the petition for sainthood, amongst a number of criteria, there has to be at least two observed, documented and scrutinised miracles for that holy person to proceed to being raised to the altars. So I did a short exercise. From Pius X at the beginning of the twentieth century to present day Pope Francis, there have been 1653 men and women canonised. That equates to 3306 verifiable and documented miracles. And that is just the ones that have been documented for the purpose of canonisation. Add to this the number of miracles from holy shrines, from the sacraments through individual prayer and so on and we have an enormous amount of supernatural activity that gives evidence to the constant activity of God pouring His sacred life into this world consistent with his nature to redeem and fulfil his promises of eternal union with him. It begins with the incarnation, it flows backwards to the moment of creation, it flows forwards through loaves and fishes through the lives of holy people right now and on towards that moment of final consummation.

AMEN

