

Series of Talks on Miracles - 2. Feeding the Five Thousand.

One of the greatest of the Lord's miracles was His feeding of the five thousand, recounted in all of the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. With the exception of the raising of Lazarus it seems to have made the biggest impact on people and excited the most attention. Because of it some wanted to take the Lord by force and make Him their king (John 6,15). Few things could have provided more impressive evidence of His power, particularly when we remember that the five thousand mentioned refers only to the men. There were women and children as well. (Matthew 14,21).

The Lord was at Capernaum at the time when news reached Him of the death by execution of John the Baptist. "When Jesus heard it" we read "He departed then by ship into a desert place apart." (Matthew 14,13). But people saw Him go and a multitude followed after Him. By now the sick and the maimed everywhere were looking to the Lord for a possible cure, and just as they did not wish to miss an opportunity for Him to heal them, others did not wish to miss an opportunity to hear what further teaching He had to tell them. "And Jesus, when He stepped ashore, saw much people, and was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd. and He began to teach them many things." (Mark 6, 34)

We do not know precisely how long the Lord was with these people but as the early evening approached the disciples became concerned. The people hadn't eaten and in their opinion they ought to have been sent away "into the country round about, and into the villages" to buy themselves bread. To their surprise, the Lord suggested that they should give them food to eat, and ignoring their astonishment He asked them to see what was available amongst the people. As it turned out, only five loaves and two fishes. "And when He had taken the five loaves and two fishes, (Jesus) looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke the loaves, and gave them to His disciples to set before them; and He divided the two fishes among them all. And they did all eat, and were filled. And they took up twelve baskets full of the fragments, and of the fishes." (Mark 6, 41-43).

As we saw in the first of this series, modern reaction to the miracle stories now usually tends to be along two lines. Some reject them outright as being legends. Others look for an alternative explanation of them, which is what so many have done with regard to this particular miracle of the feeding of the five thousand.

Swedenborg, however, wrote of it as a miracle which actually happened. Miraculously the Lord did in fact multiply the small amount of food which was brought to Him so that it became enough to feed a multitude. It was with the feeding of the five thousand as it was with the feeding of the people of Israel during their wanderings in the wilderness. The creative forces from the spiritual world reaching this natural world were specially concentrated and controlled by the Lord at those times to cause the multiplication of the food involved.

My principal concern in these talks on the miracles is, however, with the way in which they bear upon our lives today. As with the inspired Scriptures in general so with these stories in particular, a deeper, spiritual meaning is involved. The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand is not just about people and an event long ago. It is about people now and about the way in which the Lord is able to sustain and nourish us spiritually.

Just as we need natural food, for our bodies, so also we need spiritual food, and no one knows this better than the Lord Himself. We need the Lord's truth and goodness to strengthen and uphold us. We need principles and ideals we can look up to. We need the Lord's love to make our spirits healthy and strong. We need wisdom and enlightenment from Him to guide us through the various problems and perplexities of life. Here is why there is that lovely invitation in Isaiah 55:1 - "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost."

"I am the bread of life", the Lord said. "He that comes to me shall never hunger; and he that believes in me shall never thirst." More deeply understood it is this, as I've said, about which the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand teaches us. And each detail of the story tells us something about what is involved.

We noticed earlier on how it was at first that the disciples thought in terms of other sources of food to meet the people's needs. They spoke, you remember, of villages round about to which the people could be sent. Surprisingly, and in spite of all that they had seen the Lord do on other occasions, they did not think of Him and thought of a solution to their problem as lying in other directions. Sad in some ways though that may be it nevertheless highlights a tendency which most of us share. Though we are conscious of our need for guidance, for example, we all too frequently fail to turn to the Lord and instead look elsewhere.

Rather than listen to the teaching which the Lord offers we tend instead to listen to people's opinions and to what the other man says. There is no question but that as a community and a nation we have problems to resolve. But far from looking to the Lord, and to His ways of unselfishness, people turn instead to the experts, to the politicians and the economists, hoping that they will come up with all the answers.

The Lord, we noted, asked the disciples what food was on hand and after investigating, they were able to answer Him "five loaves and two fishes". It wasn't much and yet in the Lord's hands it became more than enough. The bread and fishes are a picture to us of goodness and truth, not that we have much of either, but which, nevertheless, when brought to the Lord, He can enlarge and multiply beyond our imagining. We may, by way of an illustration, not be very tolerant or compassionate, and know that this is so. Yet in the Lord's hands and under His influence these are qualities which can grow within us; grow and multiply. We may not be very unselfish and again, know and acknowledge that this is so. Yet if we take what unselfishness there is in our lives and put it to use the Lord can enlarge it. Under His influence it must grow and multiply.

No detail of the story, though on the surface it may appear trivial, is without signification, and this applies to the Lord's command to make the people sit down "by companies on the green grass. (Mark 6, 39) The multitude represent, or are a picture to us, of the innumerable every day thoughts and feelings we all have. These need to be set in order; to be arranged; "on the green grass", so to speak, or, in other words, in accordance with what we know of the principles and teachings the Lord has given us. There is no possible use in our asking the Lord to enlarge and multiply His goodness in our lives unless we are arranging things in such a way to enable that goodness to flow in. Clearly, there is something we must do beforehand. There is no use, for example, asking Him to guide our relationships with other people, with our friends and our families, unless we are consciously trying to order those relationships; trying to order our thoughts and attitudes about people; according to the principles and truths we know. This is what is meant by the Lord commanding that the people "sit down in companies upon the green grass".

This miracle of the feeding of the five thousand contains within it, as you can see, wonderfully encouraging teaching, showing us, as it does, how the Lord is always on hand ready to bless and to enrich our lives with His love and guidance.

We say, "Give us this day our daily bread" and this is how He does it. As we make an effort with what little we have the Lord can enlarge and multiply it. As we give out love so love grows and multiplies within us. As we live according to truth so that truth, in similar fashion, grows and multiplies within us also.

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