

“Five loaves and two fishes are all that we have.” The miracle of the loaves and fish is the only miracle of Jesus that appears in its fullness in all four gospels, and this suggests that Jesus considers this event, and those surrounding it, to be very important. The miracles of the Lord are never arbitrary or impulsive, rather they are carefully considered and designed to teach, by actions, not words, not only the power of God and the authority of Jesus but also the ways of God.

The first thing we notice when we consider this miracle is that it takes place immediately after the beheading of John the Baptist. The murder of the greatest prophet of the Old Testament by civil authorities takes place at the banquet of Herod, the secular ruler of Judea appointed, not by God, but by Imperial Rome. When Jesus hears this he withdraws to a deserted place, but the crowds, the sheep who had looked to John now turn to Jesus and follow him into the wilderness, like Moses before him. The death of John the Baptist signifies a formal change in covenant, the end of the old and the beginning of the new. Prior to John’s death, Jesus went about Judea and Galilee preaching the kingdom and healing the sick, the blind, the deaf, the possessed and the lame, but now, after the death of John, Jesus’ ministry takes a dramatically new direction, now he performs a Messianic sign that draws from Old Testament prophecy to mark the beginning of the New Covenant theology. Isaiah the prophet had proclaimed, “On this mountain the LORD of hosts will provide for all peoples. A feast of rich food and choice wines...” The five loaves bring to our mind the five loaves that David received from his Father to give to Saul and the five loaves of Holy Bread that the priest gave David to feed his companions when David fled from Saul. It also brings to mind the prophet Elisha feeding one hundred men with twenty barley loaves. All these images would have been made present to the people when Jesus multiplied the loaves and feeds the multitude. When Jesus broke the bread his first action was to give thanks to the Father. This is the origin of the word Eucharist, which comes

from the Greek word meaning ‘giving thanks’. The very first lesson that Jesus teaches in this miracle is that we are called to give thanks to the Father for his blessings. At this point we might also take note of the contrast between the secular banquet of Herod that was celebrated with wine and song and dancing but which ended in death, and the sacred banquet that Jesus provides that begins with a prayer of thanksgiving and ends with an abundance of life giving bread.

The miracle of the loaves and fishes was substantively different from any of the other miracles that Jesus had performed up to this time because it was intended to be a messianic sign of the New Covenant, sealed with the body and blood of Jesus. This miracle was performed by Jesus near Nazareth and Cana, which was predominately Israelite territory, because it was given explicitly to the children of Israel, symbolized by the twelve baskets of fragments that the disciples would gather up after everyone had eaten his or her fill. The deserted place where there was no food is symbolic of the world without Christ, and the Apostles asking Jesus to dismiss the multitude represents their rootedness in the world.

When Jesus takes the bread, looks up to heaven, blesses it and gives it to the apostles, this is purely Eucharistic imagery and it tells us of the role that the Apostles, and their successors the bishops, are going to play in the Church, which Jesus is founding by this action. Notice that there was no visible multiplication of the loaves and fishes at this point. The miracle occurs in the distribution itself and is not made evident until the end, when everyone has been fed and the disciples have collected up the twelve baskets of remnants. Only then does the hidden miracle become evident to all. The Apostles do not cause the multiplication but they are its instruments, just as the bishops and priests are Christ’s instruments in the transformation of our gift of bread and wine into His own body and blood. Like the Eucharist, the miracle itself remains hidden, never overt, and its reality only becomes evident when everything is done and the remnants are gathered up,

just as the miraculous work of the Eucharist in transforming our lives will only become evident at the end of our lives, when we, too, are gathered up and presented to the Lord.

This miracle also precedes Jesus' own testimony that the Eucharist is truly the bread of life come down from heaven, the bread that must be eaten if we are to have life within us. Following his Eucharistic discourse in John 6, Jesus performs another miracle of multiplication of loaves, this time in the land of the Gentiles drawing them into communion with Israel and God. The second miracle of the feeding of the multitude is vitally connected to the first and is no less significant, for it is the completion of Jesus' establishment of the kingdom of heaven on earth. It, too, is preceded by a miraculous healing of a multitude of the blind, the lame and the sick, demonstrating that this second feeding also fulfills the ancient prophecy of Isaiah and is a foretaste of the Eucharistic banquet instituted by Christ at the Last Supper. Jesus himself points to the hidden meaning of these miracles when he says, *“Do you not yet understand, and do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many wicker baskets you took up? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you took up? How do you not comprehend that I was not speaking to you about bread?”*

Sacred scripture is rich with many meanings and many levels of meaning. The more that we study it; the more we are fed by Him who loves us. Now that our minds and hearts have been fed at the table of the word, let us turn to the table of the Eucharist where our souls will be fed that we may become more and more like him.