

Along with that well-known miracle of the turning of water into wine at the Wedding Feast in Cana in Galilee, this incredible miracle of the Feeding of the 5,000 is one of THE most well-known miracles which occurred during Jesus' ministry. It is a miracle which is reported in slightly different versions in all 4 gospels. For many people, these miracles present an uncomfortable aspect of the gospel and of our Christian religion. In many ways, they do seem illogical and they cannot really be explained in scientific terms. Many do try to explain them away with some kind of natural explanation. In the case of the Feeding of the five thousand, it has been suggested that the young lad, who was probably carrying the provisions for Jesus' 12 disciples - a picnic of five loaves and two fishes, was prompted to share these and his sharing was then imitated by everyone in the crowd sharing each with their neighbour what they had until all were fed. Another explanation put forward by some commentators is that because of its obvious resemblance to the celebration of the Lords Supper or Holy Communion - Jesus takes the bread, looks up to heaven, blesses and breaks it - that this was what really happened. Everyone had a very small amount of bread and was therefore fed spiritually, and possibly the mention of the fishes only refers to the secret Christian symbol of "ichthus" the fish, "Jesus Christ Son Of God, our Saviour". But then it becomes difficult to explain away the super-abundance of the food which was multiplied to the extent that there were still 12 basketsful of broken pieces left over after all had eaten. It is well to mention these two miracles in the same breath, the feeding of the 5,000 and the turning of wine into water at the Wedding Feast, since in both cases they demonstrate God's abundant generosity in meeting the immediate needs of people at a particular time and in a particular place. But in John's gospel where the miracle of wine into water is suffixed with the comment that this was the first of many signs which Jesus did and as John puts it, "He manifested His glory and His disciples believed in Him." These signs were not just wonderful supernatural miracles. We need to look beyond the material elements of the miracle. These miracles were signs of the Presence of God and of the Kingdom of God. Where God is people are never to be in need or want for anything. God can and does provide all that we need, if only we will trust Him and more importantly if only we will obey Him.

But whether you simply believe the miracle on face value for what it was or you feel that there is some other natural explanation, it is obvious that

the power and wonder of this miraculous act is surrounded by the ordinariness of human need and doubt. Jesus conveys a very clear message about our human role in our relationship with the God of miracles. Clearly, as human beings, we are often full of doubt and lacking in faith and in imagination. In John's gospel version of this miracle, His disciple Andrew refers to the 5 loaves and two fishes saying, "What are they among so many?" And so the answer and the response is that we should always offer to God the little that we have, even being painfully aware of the insufficiency of our own personal human resources, be they possessions or abilities, so that He can miraculously transform them into something which will bring glory to God. You know, we all have something to offer to God, every single one of us, however little or insignificant we may think it to be, because He has made each of us a unique being with a particular gift or gifts. But God cannot do the miracle without our co-operation. What if that boy with the loaves and fishes had not been prepared to hand them over to Jesus? The miracle would not then have happened. In taking the little that the boy had to offer and by offering them to Jesus, the disciples learnt a valuable lesson that God is able to go far beyond the limitations which we try to place upon Him and upon our faith.

During these last few weeks, we've been seeing the almost obscene live images of the people of Somalia starving to death in front of our eyes and watching those pictures as many of them are walking huge distances with their children and leaving behind their homes and cattle in order to find water and food and medicine to sustain their lives. I'm quite certain that if Jesus walked upon this earth today, He would be on the very next plane to Kenya and into that refugee camp in Dadaab and would be busy providing all of their needs immediately. But instead, God calls us and all those who work tirelessly for the Aid Agencies, charities and NGO's, UNICEF and the World Food program to give as generously as we can for our starving brothers and sisters in that place. As I said before, where God is people should never be in need or want for anything. God can and does provide all that we need, if only we will trust Him and, more importantly, if only we will obey Him and share with others.

Do you realize that during our lifetimes each one of us will probably spend over 35,000 hours eating? That's the equivalent of eight years of non-stop meals, twelve hours a day - what a binge! The problem, of course, is that even after a big meal we get hungry again, don't we? At best, our food only satisfies us for a few hours. Yet in this story of the miracle of

the feeding of the 5,000, Jesus symbolically offers us all spiritual food that satisfies our spiritual hunger forever. In John's gospel in the suffix to this story, the reading makes it clear in verse 27 that Jesus was intent on giving more than just physical bread. Jesus urged His disciples to work and I quote "not for this perishable food, but for the food that lasts, the food of eternal life." The real bread, the bread which brings real life, is Jesus Himself. He is the One Whom the Father gives to us and He is the One Who satisfies our deepest needs. You can't buy it in the supermarket. It is only to be found in the Person of Jesus our Lord and Saviour. Jesus knew that it did not make for true discipleship if people thought of Him merely as a wonder-worker. His was a spiritual mission which looked for changed lives. He offers no easy way or set of rules by the following of which people can "do the works of God" and find eternal life. If we really love God and offer Him the little that we have, He will open doors of opportunity through which we can pass into service for Him. But all the time the first need is for that trust on our part which will enable Him to give us the spiritual food for our life's journey. To come to Jesus with complete trust is to find life's deepest needs fully satisfied.

Well, how typical was this reaction of Jesus in this remote place near the Sea of Galilee as He tells His disciples to give the crowds something to eat? Jesus is actually giving them and us a disguised commandment. "YOU give them something to eat." He says. This is not just a story about something which Jesus did 2,000 years ago. It is a story about all humankind and all who are the followers of Jesus Christ today. Christ is telling us, as He did Peter on the shore of Galilee after His resurrection, to feed His sheep. Yes, of course, the feeding implied by that conversation with Peter is specifically, the feeding of the word, the spreading of the gospel, the Good News of Jesus. So this feeding is not just the obvious one of food. However, it's quite clear that there is no point in preaching the gospel to another human-being, when their whole circumstance is pervaded by gnawing hunger and the threat of death by starvation. And so this is why we need to give generously for our starving brothers and sisters in Somalia and Kenya and Ethiopia. Thank God that the world has finally begun to wake up to this tragedy during this past week and the vital supplies of food, water, medicines and tents, are now actually beginning to be shipped into Somalia and Kenya. But of course a great deal more is going to be needed in the future. So, I would urge you all not just to give generously to this cause but to keep the suffering peoples of Somalia and Kenya and Ethiopia in your daily prayers, for it is certainly going to take yet another miracle of feeding, but this time not

5,000 but more like 5 million, all those who are at risk of starving to death today in the horn of Africa. Amen.