

MIRACLES

Mark 6:30-56

A sermon by Peter Budd

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As we read through Mark's gospel, one question keeps arising.

Who is this?

Who is this Jesus?

Who is this, who heals people of all kinds of ailments?

Who is this, who drives out demons?

Who is this, whose teaching is amazing, if not always readily comprehensible?

Who is this, who has power over wind and wave?

Who is this, who can even raise a dead girl to life?

Who is this, who the crowds are desperate to see?

Trekking across the countryside to find him,

when he tries to escape with his disciples for a rest.

Who is this, who does the most extraordinary things?

Miracles.

In today's passage we have two mind-boggling miracles.

We have 5,000 or more people being fed,

from five loaves of bread and two fish.

And we have Jesus ambling across a windswept lake,

and scaring his disciples witless in the process.

These are not everyday events.

They're utterly astonishing events.

If we don't question them, there's something wrong.

We're meant to gasp in bewilderment.

We're meant to stop, and think, and ask

"what does this signify; what does this mean?"

Some people, of course, will say miracles are impossible.

They say they go against nature, against science.

Well, I'm a scientist, a Professor of Polymer Chemistry.

But that doesn't mean I can discount miracles,

without at least thinking about them.

The whole scientific process involves looking out for the unexpected,

seeking out patterns,

searching for explanations.

And one thing about the miracles in the Bible,

is that, for some of them at least, there are clear physical explanations.

Consider how the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, as recorded in Exodus chapter 14 verse 21.

"Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea,

and all that night the Lord drove the sea back..."

Here we have God acting, a miracle.

But there's also a physical explanation.

How did the Lord drive the sea back?

"with a strong east wind"

God at work, through a natural process.

A strong east wind, blowing all through the night.

A process that has actually been modelled, using a supercomputer.

(C. Drew & W. Han, Plos One, 2010, 5, e12481)

It's still a miracle.

An extraordinarily rare event, happening at just the right time.

But it doesn't go against nature.

And that shouldn't surprise us.

For what is nature, other than what God has imagined and brought into being.

What are the so-called laws of nature, other than what God has decreed?

Now, God can break his own laws if he wants to, but I'm not convinced that he would.

The God I see in the Bible is consistent in character and behaviour.

As expressed in James 1:17

“the Father of the heavenly lights,
who does not change like shifting shadows.”

Personally, I suspect God has built into the rules of his creation, scope for miracle.

Even if we can't see how those rules work.

For some of the miracles in the Bible, there are clear physical explanations.

But what about the first of today's mind-boggling miracles?

5,000 or more people being fed, from five loaves of bread and two fish.

Some people will say this was a miracle of generosity.

That people had food with them, and were inspired to share it.

That would be a miracle in itself.

But that isn't how the passage reads.

It reads as though a small quantity of food was somehow multiplied
into a large quantity of food.

Now, there's nothing odd about carbohydrate being produced out of thin air.

It happens all the time, through the process of photosynthesis, as plants grow.

Carbon dioxide from the air is combined with water and converted to sugars.

The main stuff of a plant – the carbon – all comes out of the air.

And ultimately, that's what feeds us all.

It may not be the same process going on in the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000.

But that doesn't mean there's no process.

If this had been a Hollywood script,

we might have had a flash, a bang, and – hey presto – tables laden with food appear.

But that's not the sort of thing that happens in the Bible.

It seems we need a template – some food – if we're to get more food.

That's what happens here, and that's what happens on other occasions in the Bible.

Later in Mark, in Chapter 8, we have another event where loaves and fish are multiplied.

On that occasion, seven loaves and a few small fish.

Back in 1 Kings 17 verse 16, we have a jar of flour that was not used up,

and a jug of oil that did not run dry.

When I see a pattern like that, I think there's probably a process,

even if I don't know exactly what it is.

What about the second of today's mind-boggling miracles?

Walking on water.
Actually, of course, we can all walk on water.
It's just that normally the temperature needs to be below zero degrees Celsius.

You may know that water is very unusual,
in that the solid form is less dense than the liquid form at the freezing point,
so ice forms on top of liquid water,
whereas most substances solidify bottom up.
Water is unusual because of the way the molecules interact with each other
through what are called hydrogen bonds.
In ice, each water molecule is hydrogen bonded to four neighbours,
forming a relatively open structure.
In the liquid state, water is still largely hydrogen bonded,
but the bonds are continually breaking and re-forming.
Could statistical fluctuations in the hydrogen-bonded structure of water
support a man on one particular windy night?
It's not very probable, but it doesn't have to be probable.
It just has to be possible.

The thing about probability, as every statistician knows, is that improbable things happen.
There are very many improbable things,
so it's highly probable that some improbable things will happen.
We just don't know which, or when.
But God is in charge, even of chance events.
As it says in Proverbs 16 verse 33.
"The lot is cast into the lap,
but its every decision is from the Lord."

The point of all this is that it's not rational
for anyone to discount the extraordinary events recorded in the Bible,
without at least stopping and thinking about them;
asking "what does this signify; what does this mean?"
So let's take a closer look at the two mind-boggling miracles in today's passage.

First, the feeding of the 5,000.
5,000 men, it says in verse 44.
Including women and children, there may have been many, many more.

This is the only miracle, apart from the resurrection, recorded in all four gospels.
But Mark mentions a detail that the others don't.
He mentions that the grass was green. (*Mark 6:39*)
Verse 39
"Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass."
That tells us it was springtime, before the summer sun dried up the grass.
Consistent with John's account that the Jewish Passover Feast was near. (*John 6:4*)

Now, what does Mark tell us about the crowd that day.
Verse 34
"When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them,
because they were like sheep without a shepherd."

We have sheep in need of a shepherd,
they're made to sit down on green grass,
and they're fed, restored, satisfied.

What does that make us think of?

How about Psalm 23?

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures."

There's a hint here of Jesus as the good shepherd.

And with the Passover Feast being near,

remembering the night the Israelites were led out of slavery in Egypt,
remembering how a lamb was slaughtered,
and its blood marked the households who would be passed over,
protected from a final, terrible plague...

There's a hint here of what Jesus came to do.

To die like a Passover lamb.

Later, Jesus says more explicitly, as recorded in John chapter 10 verse 11

"I am the good shepherd.
The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

If the time of year was a reminder of the Passover and the Exodus,
then the provision of bread, seemingly from heaven, was a reminder
of how the Israelites ate manna in the wilderness.

This is brought out in John's gospel chapter 6 verse 35, where Jesus declares

"I am the bread of life.
He who comes to me will never go hungry,
and he who believes in me will never be thirsty."

Jesus offers in himself that which is fully, completely, and eternally satisfying.

Bread from heaven.

In this story, there are hints about who Jesus is, and what he came to do.

And there's a hint, too, about how, in the future, Jesus would work through his church.

Delegating responsibility.

What did Jesus tell the disciples, when they were faced with a large, hungry crowd?

Verse 37

"You give them something to eat."

They were given responsibility to feed the crowd.

And they had some organizing to do.

Verses 39 and 40

"Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass.
So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties."

There's an echo here of how Moses delegated responsibility,
as recorded in Exodus chapter 18 verse 25

"He chose capable men from all Israel and made them leaders of the people,
officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens."

And that's how it is for us in the church today.

If we've been given responsibility, whether over a thousand, hundred, fifty or ten,
we have practical tasks to do,

and we're called to feed the people, literally and metaphorically.

And where we faithfully take on what God calls us to do,
we'll discover how generous our God is,
just as in the story of the feeding of the 5,000.

Not only did they all eat and were satisfied... (*Mark 6:42*)

There was an overabundance. (*Mark 6:43*)

“the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish.”

What a day for the disciples.

But did they understand it all at the time?

No, they didn't.

So, as already mentioned, there was a near repeat performance later,
recorded in Mark chapter 8.

On that occasion, seven loaves and a few small fish feeding 4,000 men.

And seven basketfuls, seven big basketfuls, left over.

And did the disciples understand then?

No, they didn't.

Because when Jesus later reminded them

about the twelve basketfuls left over after the feeding of the 5,000

and the seven big basketfuls left over after the feeding of the 4,000

he had to say to them; this is Mark chapter 8 verse 21

“Do you still not understand?”

We'll come to that later in our studies in Mark, and find out

“Do we understand?”

But back to that day of the feeding of the 5,000.

Jesus packed his disciples off in a boat, dismissed the crowd,

then went up on a mountainside to pray. (*Mark 6:45,46*)

A reminder that, whoever we are, we need to make time for prayer.

Time for spiritual refreshment.

The disciples, meanwhile, were struggling to cross the lake,

straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. (*Mark 6:47,48*)

So what did Jesus do?

He walked on the lake.

Another mind-boggling miracle.

Now, remember the disciples had already seen Jesus calm a storm on the lake.

That was back in Mark chapter 4.

So when they saw Jesus out on the lake, walking past them, did they say

“Oh there's Jesus, we'll just ask him to sort out the weather”?

No, they didn't.

Despite everything they'd already seen,

it didn't occur to them it could actually be Jesus out there.

The best they could think of was that it was a ghost.

And they were terrified.

But Jesus understood their fright, and acted immediately to calm them.

“Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.” (*Mark 6:50*)

And when he climbed into the boat with them, the wind died down.
Amazing.

Mind-boggling miracles show us something of who Jesus is.
Jesus, the compassionate shepherd,
 who makes sure his sheep are fed, restored, satisfied.
Jesus, the good shepherd who will lay down his life for his sheep.
Jesus, the bread of life,
 fully, completely, and eternally satisfying.
Jesus, the leader who delegates responsibility,
 even to the likes of us.
Jesus, who shows how generous God is,
 more than meeting our needs.
Jesus, who reminds us of the importance of prayer,
 of quality time with the Heavenly Father.
Jesus, the Lord of all creation,
 who rules over wave and wind.
Jesus, who offers courage when we're frightened,
 brings calm after the storm.

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