**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**JOHN-028**. **THE FOURTH MIRACLE IN JOHN'S GOSPEL by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And Jesus took the loaves; and when He had given thanks, He distributed to the disciples, and the disciples to them that were set down; and likewise of the fishes as much as they would."*

*John 6:11*

This narrative of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand is introduced into John's Gospel with singular abruptness. We read in the first verse of the chapter: After these things Jesus went over the Sea of Galilee, i.e. from the western to the eastern side. But the Evangelist does not tell us how or when He got to the western side. These things, which are recorded in the previous chapter, are the healing of the impotent man at the Pool of Bethesda, the consequent outburst of Jewish hostility, and the profound and solemn discourse of our Lord, in which He claims filial relationship to the Father. So that we must insert between the chapters a journey from Jerusalem to Galilee, and a lapse at all events of some months--or, if the feast referred to in the previous chapter be, as it may be, the Passover, an interval of nearly a year. So little care for the mere framework of events has this fourth Gospel; so entirely would the Evangelist have us see that his reason for narrating this miracle is mainly its spiritual lessons and the revelation which it makes of Christ as Himself the Bread of Life.

Similarly, he has no care to tell us anything about the reasons for our Lord's retirement with His disciples from Galilee to the eastern bank. These we have to learn from the other Evangelists. They give us several concurrent motives--the news of the death of John the Baptist; and of the desire of the bloody tyrant to see Jesus, which foreboded evil; also the return of the twelve Apostles from their trial journey, which involved the necessity of rest for them; and, perhaps, the approach of the Passover, which our Lord did not purpose to observe in Jerusalem because of the Jewish hostility, and which, therefore, suggested the withdrawal to temporary retirement.

All these reasons concurring, He and His disciples would seek for a brief space of seclusion and repose. But the hope of securing such was vain. The people followed in crowds so eagerly, so hastily, in such enormous numbers, that no natural or ordinary provision for their wants could be thought of. Hence the occasion for the miracle before us.

Now I think that this narrative, with which I wish to deal, falls mainly into two portions, both of which suggest for us some important lessons. There is, first, the preparations for the sign; and then there is the sign itself. Let us look at these two points in succession.

**I. First, then, the preparations for the sign.**

Now it is to be observed that this is the only incident before our Lord's last journey to Jerusalem which is recorded by all four Evangelists; therefore the variations between the narratives are of especial interest, and these variations are very considerable. We find, for instance, that in John's account the question as to how the bread was to be provided came from Christ; in the other Evangelistsaccounts that question is discussed first amongst the Apostles privately. We find from John's narrative that the question was suggested even before the multitudes had come to Jesus. We find in the Synoptic Gospels that it arose at the close of a long day of teaching and of healing.

Now it is possible that this diversity of time may be the solution of the diversity of the person proposing. That is to say, it is quite legitimate to conclude that John's account takes up the incident at an earlier period than the other Evangelists do, and that the full order of events was this; that, privately, at the beginning of the day, whilst the people were yet flocking to our Lord, He, to one of the disciples alone, suggests the question, Whence shall we buy bread that these may eat?and that the answer, Two hundred pennyworth of bread is not sufficient that every one of them may take a little, explains for us the suggestion of the same amount at a subsequent part of the day, by the Apostles when they asked our Lord the question, Shall we go and buy two hundred pennyworth of bread that these may eat?

Be that as it may, we may pause for a moment upon this question of our Lord's, Whence shall we buy bread that these may eat?

Now notice what a lovely glimpse we get there into the quick-rising sympathy of the Saviour with all forms of human necessity. He had gone away to snatch a brief moment of rest. The rest is denied Him; the hurrying crowds come pressing with their vulgar curiosity--for it was nothing better--after Him. No movement of impatience passes across His mind; no reluctance as He turns away from the vanishing prospect of a quiet afternoon with His friends. He looks upon them, and the first thought is a quick, instinctive movement of a divine and yet most human sympathy. The question rises in His mind of how He was to provide for them; they were not hungry yet; they had not thought where their bread was to come from. But He cared for the careless, and His heart was prophetic of their necessities, and quick to determine what He should doto supply them. So is it ever. Before we call, He answers. Thy mercy, O loving Christ! needs no more than the sight of human necessities, or even the anticipation of them, swiftly to bestir itself for their satisfaction and their supply.

But, farther, He selects for the question Philip, a man who seems to have been what is called--as if it were the highest praise--an intensely practical person; who seems to have had little faith in anything that he could not get hold of by his senses, and who lived upon the low level of common sense. He always lays stress upon seeing. His answer to Nathanael when he said, Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?was, Come and see. A very good answer, and yet one that relies only on the external manifestation of Christ to the senses. Then, on another occasion, he breaks in upon the lofty spiritualities of our Lord's final discourse to His disciples, with the malapropos request, Lord, show us the Father, and it sufficeth us. And so here, to the man who believed in his eyesight, and did not easily apprehend much else, Jesus puts this question, Where is the bread to come from for all these people? This He said to prove him. He hoped that the question might have shaped itself in the hearer's mind into a promise, and that he might have been able to say in answer, Thou canst supply; we need not buy.

So Christ does still. He puts problems before us, too, to settle; takes us, as it were, into His confidence with interrogations that try us, whether we can rise above the level of the material and visible, or whether all our conceptions of possibilities are bounded by these. And sometimes, even though the question at first sight seems to evoke only such a response as it did here, it works more deeply down below afterwards, and we are helped by the very difficulty to rise to a clear faith.

Philip's answer is very significant. Two hundred pennyworth of bread are not sufficient. He casts his eye over the multitude, he makes a rough, rapid calculation, one does not exactly see the data on which it was based; and he comes to the conclusion, Two hundred pennyworth(in our English money some £7 or £8 worth) would give them each a morsel. And no doubt he thought himself very practical. He was a man of figures; he believed in what could be put into tables and statistics. Yes; and like a great many other people of his sort, he left out one small element in his calculation, and that was Jesus Christ, and so his answer went creeping along the low levels, dragging itself like a half-wounded snake, when it might have risen on the wings of faith into the empyrean, and soared and sung.

So learn that when we have to deal with Christ's working--and when have we not to deal with Christ's working?--perhaps probabilities that can be tabulated are not altogether the best bases upon which to rest our calculations. Learn that the audacity of a faith that expects great things, though there be nothing visible upon which to build, is wiser and more prudent than the creeping common-sense that adheres to facts which are shadows, and forgets that the chief fact is that we have an Almighty Helper and Friend at our sides.

Still further, among these preliminaries, let us point to the exhibition of the inadequate resources which Christ, according to the fuller narrative in the other Evangelists, desired to know. There is a little lad here with five barley loaves--one per thousand--and two small fishes--insufficient in quantity and very, very common in quality, for barley bread was the food of the poorest. But what are they among so many?And Christ says, Bring them to Me.

Christ's preparation for making our poor resources adequate for anything is to drive home into our hearts the consciousness of their insufficiency. We need, first of all, to be brought to this, All that I have is this wretched little stock; and what is that measured against the work that I have to do, and the claims upon me?Only when we are brought to that can His great power pour itself into us and fill us with rejoicing and overcoming strength. The old mystics used to say, and they said truly: You must be emptied of yourself before you can be filled by God. And the first thing for any man to learn, in preparation for receiving a mightier power than his own into his opening heart, is to know that all his own strength is utter and absolute weakness. What are they among so many?When we have once gone right down into the depths of felt impotence, and when our work has risen before us, as if it were far too great for our poor strengths which are weaknesses, then we are brought, and only then, into the position in which we may begin to hope that power equal to our desire will be poured into our souls.

And so the last of the preparations that I will touch upon is that majestic preparation for blessing by obedience. And Jesus said, Make the men sit down. And there they sat themselves, as Mark puts it in his picturesque way, like so many garden plots--the rectangular oblongs in a garden in which pot-herbs are grown--on the green grass, below the blue sky, by the side of the quiet lake. Cannot you fancy how some of them seated themselves with a scoff, and some with a quiet smile of incredulity; and some half sheepishly and reluctantly; and some in mute expectancy; and some in foolish wonder; and yet all of them with a partial obedience? And says John in the true translation: So the men sat down, therefore Jesus took the loaves. Sit you down where He bids you, and your mouths will not be long empty. Do the things He tells you, and you will get the food that you need. Our business is to obey and to wait, and His business is, when we are seated, to open His hand and let the mercy drop. So much for the preparations for this great miracle.

**II. Now, in the next place, a word as to the sign itself.**

I take two lessons, and two only, out of it. I see in it, first, a revelation of Christ, as continually through all the ages sustaining men's physical life. And I see in it, second, a symbol of Christ as Himself the Bread of Life.

As to the first, there is here, I believe, a revelation of the law of the universe, of Christ as being through all the ages the Sustainer of the physical life of men. What was done then once, with the suppression of certain links in the chain, is done always, with the introduction of those links. The miraculous moment in the narrative is not described to us. We do not know where or when there came in the supernatural power which multiplied the loaves--probably as they passed from the hand of the Master. But be that as it may, it was Christ's will that made the provision which fed all these five thousand. And I believe that the teaching of Scripture is in accordance with the deepest philosophy, that the one cause of all physical phenomena is the will of a present God; howsoever that may usually conform to the ordinary method of working which people generalise and call laws. The reason why anything is, and the reason why all things change, is the energy there and then of the indwelling God who is in all His works, and who is the only Will and Power in the physical world.

And I believe, further, that Scripture teaches us that that continuous will, which is the cause of all phenomena and the underlying subsistence on which all things repose, is all managed and mediated by Him who from of old was named the Word; in whom was life, and without whom was not anything made that was made. Our Christ is Creator, our Christ is Sustainer, our Christ moves the stars and feeds the sparrows. He was before all things, and in Him all things consist. He opens His hand--and there is the print of a nail in it--and satisfies the desire of every living thing.

So learn how to think of second causes, and see in this story a transient manifestation, in unusual form, of an eternal and permanent fact. Jesus took the loaves and distributed to them that were set down.

And so, secondly, the miracle is a sign--a symbol of Him as the true Bread and Food of the world. That is the explanation and commentary which He Himself appends to it in the subsequent part of the chapter, in the great discourse which is founded upon this miracle.

I am the Bread of Life. There is a triple statement by our Lord upon this subject in the remaining portion of the chapter. He says, I am the Bread of Life. My personality is that which not only sustains life when it is given, but gives life to them that feed upon it. But more than that, the bread which I will give, pointing to some future givingbeyond the present moment, and therefore something more than His life and example, is My flesh, which--in some as yet unexplained way--I give for the life of the world. And that there may be no misunderstanding, there is a third, deeper, more mysterious statement still: My flesh is meat indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. Repulsive and paradoxical, but in its very offensiveness and paradox, proclaiming that it covers a mighty truth, and the truth, brother, is this, the one Food that gives life to will, affections, conscience, understanding, to the whole spirit of a man, is that great Sacrifice of the Incarnate Lord who gave upon the Cross His flesh, and on the Cross shed His blood, for the life of the world that was dead in trespasses and sins. Christ, our Passover, is sacrificed for us, and we feed on the sacrifice. Let your conscience, your heart, your desires, your anticipations, your understanding, your will, your whole being feed on Him. He will be cleansing, He will be love, He will be fruition, He will be hope, He will be truth, He will be righteousness, He will be all. Feed upon Him by that faith which is the true eating of the true Bread, and your souls shall live.

And notice finally here, the result of this miracle as transferred to the region of symbol. They did all eat and were filled; men, women, children, both sexes, all ages, all classes, found the food that they needed in the bread that came from Christ's hands. If any man wants dainties that will tickle the palates of Epicureans, let him go somewhere else. But if he wants bread, to keep the life in and to stay his hunger, let him go to this Christ who is human nature's daily food.

The world has scoffed for nineteen centuries at the barley bread that the Gospel provides; coarse by the side of its confectionery, but it is enough to give life to all who eat it. It goes straight to the primal necessities of human nature. It does not coddle a class, or pander to unwholesome, diseased, or fastidious appetites. It is the food of the world, and not of a section. All men can relish it, all men need it. It is offered to them all.

And more than that; notice the inexhaustible abundance. They did all eat, and were filled. And then they took up--not of the fragments, as our Bible gives it, conveying the idea of the crumbs that littered the grass after the repast was over, but of the broken pieces--the portions that came from Christ's hands--twelve baskets full, an immensely greater quantity than they had to start with. The gift doth stretch itself as tis received. Other goods and other possessions perish with the using, but this increases with use. The more one eats, the more there is for him to eat. And all the world may live upon it for ever, and there will be more at the end than there was at the beginning.

Brethren, why do ye spend your money for that which is not bread? There is no answer worthy of a rational soul, no answer that will stand either the light of conscience or the clearer light of the Day of Judgment. I come to you now, and although my poor words may be but like the barley bread and the two fishes--nothing amongst all this gathered audience--I come with Christ in my hands, and I say to you, Eat, and your souls shall live. He will spread a table for you in the wilderness, and take you to sit at last at His table in His Kingdom.