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

**LUKE-034**. **BREAD FROM HEAVEN by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"10. And the apostles, when they were returned, told Him all that they had done. And He took them, and went aside privately into a desert place belonging to the city, called Bethsaida. 11. And the people, when they knew it, followed Him; and He received them, and spake unto them of the kingdom of God, and healed them that had need of healing. 12. And when the day began to wear away, then came the twelve, and said unto Him, Send the multitude away, that they may go into the towns and country round about, and lodge, and get victuals; for we are here in a desert place. 13. But He said unto them, Give ye them to eat. And they said, We have no more but five loaves and two fishes; except we should go and buy meat for all this people. 14. (For they were about five thousand men.) And He said to His disciples, Make them sit down by fifties in a company. 15. And they did so, and made them all sit down. 16. Then He took the five loaves, and the two fishes; and, looking up to heaven, He blessed them, and brake, and gave to the disciples to set before the multitude. 17. And they did eat, and were all filled: and there was taken up of fragments that remained to them twelve baskets."*

*Luke 9:10-17*

The Apostles needed rest after their trial trip as evangelists. John the Baptist's death had just been told to Christ. The Passover was at hand, and many pilgrims were on the march. Prudence and care for His followers as well as Himself suggested a brief retirement, and our Lord sought it at the Eastern Bethsaida, a couple of miles up the Jordan from its point of entrance to the lake. Matthew and Mark tell us that He went by boat, which Luke does not seem to have known. Mark adds that the curious crowd, which followed on foot, reached the place of landing before Him, and so effectually destroyed all hope of retirement. It was a short walk round the north-western part of the head of the lake, and the boat would be in sight all the way, so that there was no escape for its passengers.

Luke records the self-oblivious cordiality of Christ's reception of the intrusive crowd. Without a sigh or sign of impatience, He welcomed them--a difficult thing to do, and one which few of us could have achieved. The motives of most of them can have been nothing higher than what leads vulgar people of all ranks and countries to buzz about distinguished men, utterly regardless of delicacy or considerateness. They want to see the notoriety, no matter what it costs him. But Jesus received them patiently, because, as Mark touchingly tells, He was moved with pity, and saw in their rude crowding round Him the token of their lack of guides and teachers. They seemed to Him, not merely a mob of intrusive sight-seers, but like a huddled mass of unshepherded sheep.

Christ's heart felt more lovingly than ours because His eye saw deeper, and His eye saw deeper because His heart felt more lovingly. If we would live nearer Him, we should see, as He did, enough in every man to draw our pity and help, even though he may jostle and interfere with us.

The short journey to Bethsaida would be in the early morning, and a long day of toil followed instead of the hoped-for quiet. Note that singular expression, Them that had need of healing He healed. Why not simply them that were sick? Probably to bring out the thought that misery made unfailing appeal to Him, and that for Him to see need was to supply it. His swift compassion, His all-sufficient power to heal, and the conditions of receiving His healing, are all wrapped up in the words. Coming to the miracle itself, we may throw the narrative into three parts--the preliminaries, the miracle, and the abundant overplus.

**I.** Our Lord leads up to the miracle by forcing home on the minds of the disciples the extent of the need and the utter inadequacy of their resources to meet it, and by calling on them and the crowd for an act of obedience which must have seemed to many of them ludicrous. John shows us that He had begun to prepare them, at the moment of meeting the multitude, by His question to Philip. That had been simmering in the disciplesminds all day, while they leisurely watched Him toiling in word and work, and now they come with their solution of the difficulty. Their suggestion was a very sensible one in the circumstances, and they are not to be blamed for not anticipating a miracle as the way out. However many miracles they saw, they never seem to have expected another. That has been thought to be unnatural, but surely it is true to nature. They moved in a confusing mixture of the miraculous and the natural which baffled calculation as to which element would rule at any given moment. Their faith was feeble, and Christ rebuked them for their slowness to learn the lesson of this very miracle and its twin feeding of the four thousand. They were our true brothers in their failure to grasp the full meaning of the past, and to trust His power.

The strange suggestion that the disciples should feed the crowd must have appeared to them absurd, but it was meant to bring out the clear recognition of the smallness of their supply. Therein lie great lessons. Commands are given and apparent duties laid on us, in order that we may find out how impotent we are to do them. It can never be our duty to do what we cannot do, but it is often our duty to attempt tasks to which we are conspicuously inadequate, in the confidence that He who gives them has laid them on us to drive us to Himself, and there to find sufficiency. The best preparation of His servants for their work in the world is the discovery that their own stores are small. Those who have learned that it is their task to feed the multitude, and who have said We have no more than such and such scanty resources, are prepared to be the distributors of His all-sufficient supply.

What a strange scene that must have been as the hundred groups of fifty each arranged themselves on the green grass, in the setting sunlight, waiting for a meal of which there were no signs! It took a good deal of faith to seat the crowd, and some faith for the crowd to sit. How expectant they would be! How they would wonder what was to be done next! How some of them would laugh, and some sneer, and all watch the event! We, too, have to put ourselves in the attitude to receive gifts of which sense sees no sign; and if, in obedience to Christ's word, we sit down expecting Him to find the food, we shall not be disappointed, though the table be spread in the wilderness, and neither storehouse nor kitchen be in sight.

**II.** The miracle itself has some singular features. Like that of the draught of fishes, it was not called forth by the cry of suffering, nor was the need which it met one beyond the reach of ordinary means. It was certainly one of the miracles most plainly meant to strike the popular mind, and the enthusiasm excited by it, according to John's account, was foreseen by Christ. Why did He evoke enthusiasm which He did not mean to gratify? For the very purpose of bringing the carnal expectations of the crowd to a head, that they might be the more conclusively disappointed. The miracle and its sequel sifted and sent away many disciples, and were meant to do so.

All the accounts tell of Christ's blessing. Matthew and Mark do not say what He blessed, and perhaps the best supplement is God, but Luke says that He blessed the food. What He blesses is blessed; for His words are deeds, and communicate the blessing which they speak. The point at which the miraculous multiplication of the food came in is left undetermined, but perhaps the difference in the tenses of the verbs hints at it. Blessedand brakeare in the tense which describes a single act; gaveis in that which describes a continuous repeated action. The pieces grew under His touch, and the disciples always found His hands full when they came back with their own empty. But wherever the miraculous element appeared, creative power was exercised by Jesus; and none the less was it creative, because there was the substratumof the loaves and fishes. Too much stress has been laid on their being used, and some commentators have spoken as if without them the miracle could not have been wrought. But surely the distinction between pure creation and multiplication of a thing already existing vanishes when a loaf is multipliedso as to feed a thousand men.

The symbolical aspect of the miracle is set forth in the great discourse which follows it in John's Gospel. Jesus is the Bread of God which came down from heaven. That Bread is broken for us. Not in His Incarnation alone, but in His Death, is He the food of the world; and we have not only to eat His flesh, but to drink His blood, if we would live. Nor can we lose sight of the symbol of His servantstask. They are the distributors of the heaven-sent bread. If they will but take their poor stores to Jesus, with the acknowledgment of their insufficiency, He will turn them into inexhaustible supplies, and they will find that there is that scattereth, and yet increaseth. What Christ blesses is always enough.

**III.** The abundance left over is significant. Twelve baskets, such as poor travellers carried their belongings in, were filled; that is to say, each Apostle who had helped to feed the hungry had a basketful to bring off for future wants. The broken pieceswere not crumbs that littered the grass, but the portions that came from Christ's hands.

His provision is more than enough for a hungry world, and they who share it out among their fellows have their own possession of it increased. There is no surer way to receive the full sweetness and blessing of the Gospel than to carry it to some hungry soul. These full baskets teach us, too, that In Christ's gift of Himself as the Bread of Life there is ever more than at any given moment we can appropriate. The Christian's spiritual experiences have ever an element of infinity in them; and we feel that if we were able to take in more, there would be more for us to take. Other food cloys and does not satisfy, and leaves us starving. Christ satisfies and does not cloy, and we have always remaining, yet to be enjoyed, the boundless stores which neither eternity will age nor a universe feeding on them consume. The Christian's capacity of partaking of Christ grows with what it feeds on, and he alone is safe in believing that To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant.