

## Sermon for Proper 13A

31 July 2011

St Paul's, K Street

✠ I speak to you in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

I was having dinner several weeks ago with a new friend, and somehow or other the conversation turned to the Scriptural accounts of the resurrection of Jesus. My friend told me that he viewed the resurrection accounts – and particularly the notion of a *bodily* resurrection – as metaphorical; there was, he felt sure, no literal bodily resurrection. Though he didn't say this, I got the feeling that he could have agreed with the dismissive comments of a Church of England bishop a generation ago, that accounts of the bodily resurrection and the empty tomb were, as such, nothing more than stories of a “conjuring trick with bones.”

Well, this was, as I say, a new friend, and I really didn't want to ruin a perfectly enjoyable evening by getting into a heated theological discussion about the doctrine of the resurrection, so I simply affirmed my own belief in the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus – and my conviction that no one who disbelieves in the bodily resurrection has any business being a deacon, priest, or bishop in the Episcopal Church – and gently steered the conversation toward less explosive topics.

I can't say that I'm exactly proud of that. In fact, I've been stewing about it off and on ever since, and I have been turning over in my mind the various things that I could have said, or should have said, and how I might teach or preach on the bodily resurrection, and why we should believe in it.

One thing I would certainly have to address is this notion of metaphor – and this is where the story of the feeding of the five thousand comes in. My friend said that he thought the accounts of the resurrection were metaphorical – and lots of treatments of the feeding of the five thousand treat it as metaphorical too. My favorite – and by “favorite” I mean the one that is so gloriously perverse that it makes me want to spit – is that what *really* happens isn't a miraculous multiplication of loaves and fish; instead, the compassion of Jesus inspires people to share the food that they have with them all along. And wouldn't that indeed be the greater miracle? such interpreters ask.

Well, no. The greater miracle would in fact be the multiplication of the loaves and fish. A bunch of people sharing a picnic, in which Jesus turns out to be a largely incidental participant in some kind of low-key Woodstock, is not a miracle. It's not even interesting.

You see, a metaphor is just a lie with good PR. Saying that the resurrection accounts are metaphorical is just a way of saying that the resurrection didn't happen. Saying that the feeding of the five thousand is metaphorical is just a way of saying that it didn't happen.

Metaphors – in this way of talking about them – always turn out to mean less than meets the eye. The feeding of the five thousand is a metaphor for the softening of hard hearts; the resurrection is a metaphor for – what exactly? I've never really understood this bit – I suppose for feeling really inspired by this Jesus fellow, who really was quite a good teacher – such a shame, what happened to him.

No, no, no. These are not metaphors; they are signs. Metaphors mean less than they appear to mean; signs always mean more. And the feeding of the five thousand was a sign that was obviously of particular importance to the early church, because it is the one miracle recorded by all four Evangelists. There can be no doubt that they intend to record an actual, historical event, in which Jesus multiplied a meager amount of food so that it met, and more than met, the needs of thousands of people. It is not a metaphor, so it means no less than this; but it is a sign, so it means more than this.

It is, first of all, a rebuke to the poverty of our spiritual imagination. The disciples don't even wait to see what Jesus is going to do. They see the crowds, look at their watches, realize that the hour is late and Domino's doesn't deliver this far out, and go straight to Jesus and say, "Send them all away. Send them off to fend for themselves." It does not even *occur* to them that God has some way of meeting the needs that they discern; they have given up without a struggle, without a thought.

And second, this sign is a reminder of how God intends to accomplish his will. Jesus meets the disciples' unimaginative, faithless capitulation with a surprising command: "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." What? Didn't I just tell you? I can't grow in my spiritual life – I haven't been able to find a

good spiritual director, and I'm just so busy with work these days. Didn't I just tell you? The parish can't grow – the budget is tight and the consultants tell us we're not well-positioned demographically right now. Didn't I just tell you? We can't have peace in the Church – some of the bishops are behaving badly, and the stakes are too high for anyone to back down. But Jesus says, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." Even when Jesus has blessed the bread and broken it, he still gives it to the disciples to distribute. He takes what they bring, multiplies it, and then returns it to them so that they can be agents of the coming kingdom.

Third, the feeding of the five thousand points to the messianic banquet. All the commentators talk about this – there was an expectation that the Messiah, when he came, would feed the people of Israel, even perhaps that there would again be manna, as there had been during the wandering in the wilderness. And here we are in the wilderness – the word translated "deserted place" is the same as the word for "wilderness" – and Jesus is feeding the crowds. But even here the commentators too often reach for metaphor rather than sign. Remember: metaphors mean less than they appear to mean; signs always mean more. If we see in the feeding of the five thousand something that merely "makes us think about" the messianic banquet, we have fallen into the metaphor trap. This is a sign: not merely a miraculous feeding, but an actual foretaste of the heavenly banquet, a spreading of the table in the wilderness in which the church always dwells, an inauguration of the heavenly meal by which we are sustained even now and which will be our sole food, our unending delight, for all eternity.

We cannot think of the foretaste of the messianic banquet without also thinking of the Eucharist, of which this miraculous feeding is itself a sign. All the Evangelists are careful to use the same sequence of words in describing the feeding of the five thousand that they, and St Paul, use in telling us of the institution of the Eucharist: he took bread, he blessed it, he broke it, he gave it. He took, he blessed, he broke, he gave. And in a few minutes, when we turn again to the Holy Table, we will see those same actions: the bread is taken, blessed, broken, and given.

Now of course we're all good Anglo-Catholics here. We believe that this heavenly meal is no mere metaphor, but a living sign – that we do not come to the altar of the Lord merely to be reminded of Jesus and to think pious thoughts about how he died for us, but that we receive him in very truth, that the Body broken for us and the

Blood shed for us are offered to us as food and drink. So we say, and so we believe – but oh, how easy to domesticate this sign so that in practice it becomes for us a mere metaphor! Because otherwise, we can scarcely bear the explosive intimacy with God that happens when the bread is taken, blessed, broken, and given, and the Lord of heaven and earth invades our lives as food and drink. What might you have thought on that day, in that deserted place, if you had fully grasped the nature of the meal that was being offered to you? Think about that, and then ponder the Eucharistic meal to which you will shortly be invited. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

And last, but greatest of all: this sign is also a revelation of God's continuing love-affair with the material world. All the spiritualizing and metaphorizing that we like to do is a rejection of the God who creates and sustains the material world, who uses bread and wine and water and oil as his instruments. If it's just a metaphor, the feeding of the five thousand tells us that what really matters is our feelings, our emotions – and that flatters us, because the tattered remnants of Greek philosophy and Gnostic mystification and folk wisdom that clutter our supposedly Christian minds all encourage us to think that the real *us* is the lofty, ethereal, spiritual bits, as opposed to the solid, lumpy bits. But we are not angels, and despite what Hollywood and Hallmark would have you believe, we will never be angels. We are human beings, creatures of flesh and blood, whose hands can be scarred and whose sides can be pierced, who laugh and cry and bleed and die, and a metaphorical Eucharist, a metaphorical Easter – these have no meaning for us. A God who does no more than inspire pious thoughts is, in the end, a God who leaves us unredeemed, starving for himself. If Jesus is raised only metaphorically – if the tomb is not empty – then death has the last word, and the vibrancy of divine life turns out to be no more than the flicker of our oh-so-spiritual self-delusion. If the miraculous feeding is only a metaphor, then we as creatures of flesh and blood fall outside the scope of God's care.

Metaphors mean less than meet the eye – but we like them, because we are timid, or faithless, because they flatter us in our delusions that we are sophisticated, oh-so-spiritual, above petty concerns like food and drink, too learned to pay attention to conjuring tricks with bones, living on a higher plane altogether. Let's not try to be more spiritual than God.