

**John 6: A tale of two miracles: the feeding of the 5000 and Walking on the Water  
Sermon for July 26th 2009 10:30a.m. Robert Innes**

When I have time, I love watching a good TV detective story. I particularly like stories with a bit of psychological complexity and some dramatic suspense. I admire the people who write these kinds of plays. In a good detective story, everything is potentially a clue. Pieces of life history, unusual behaviour, relationships between the characters which seem insignificant at the time have an inner meaning which is only disclosed later. Until at the end of the story the detective stands up and retells the story making it quite clear how the events all fitted together and why it is beyond doubt that the murderer was the butler, or the shady business partner, or the jealous girlfriend.

St. John's gospel is not exactly a detective novel. But there are similarities. It is a very clever piece of writing in which everything is potentially a clue. In a modern detective story the aim of the plot is usually to work out who killed the hero. In St. John's gospel, the aim is different. The clues are there to help us discover the hero's true identity. They show how his identity was mistaken, and how that led to his murder. And they rather subtly invite the reader to see if they can get the hero's identity right.

St. John's gospel is no ordinary piece of writing. It's not a straightforward biography of Jesus. It chooses a few carefully selected events in his life. And it uses these to build a case about who he really was. I remember the first time as a teenager that I discovered this gospel, and I was enthralled by it. I loved trying to discover the hidden meanings and inner significance. Today we're invited to look at two of the miracles recounted by John: the feeding of the 5,000 and the Walking on the Water. And I invite you to join me in "de-coding" these stories. They both illuminate the identity of the hero, how he was understood or misunderstood – and they gently challenge us to see whether we reading the story today have yet understood.

To begin with the longer story. All four gospels tell the story of the feeding of the 5,000. But John tells it in his own way. If you have a Bible you might like to open it to page....We read that Jesus crossed to the far shore of Lake Galilee. He goes out into the wilderness, away from the Galilean villages, away from the shops. A great crowd of people followed Jesus because of the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick. That is interesting. The crowd didn't follow him because they believed his teaching or because they were on a spiritual quest. They followed him because he did miraculous signs. They appreciated his power as a wonder worker. And for St. John, that is not a very good motive.

Jesus went up onto a mountainside. The location is a clue. Mountains in the Bible are associated with closeness to God and with teaching authority. It was Moses who went up onto a mountain to receive the 10 commandments. We next read in verse 4 that the Jewish Passover feast was near. That is another clue. The Passover was the great celebration of Israel's liberation from the Egyptian Pharaoh under Moses. So the scene is set at a significant time, and in a significant place, with echoes of the great leader Moses. Perhaps, we're invited to wonder, Jesus is a new Moses?

Verses 5 to 7 recount a conversation between Jesus and Philip. Jesus invites Philip to suggest how the great crowd will be fed. But it's a motivated question. The aim is to test or to stretch Philip's faith. Jesus already knows what he is going to do. But Philip doesn't see this, and he answers in a very practical way, he points to the difficulty and

huge cost of feeding so many people. Andrew now joins in the conversation. He offers 5 small barley loaves and two small fish, provided by a small boy in the crowd. Andrew is keenly aware of the disproportion between this one packed lunch and the thousands of hungry men that are gathering around. But the barley loaves are another clue. They remind us of the incident when the prophet Elisha fed 100 men with just 20 small barley loaves – the incident we heard as our Old Testament reading today. Perhaps Jesus is a new Elisha?

The crowd are instructed to sit down. We read there is a lot of grass in that place. Another clue, recalling Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want: he makes me to lie down in green pasture”. Lush grass in the Middle East is a sign of plenty. Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. And he did the same with the fish. There is no explanation at all of the mechanics of the miracle. In John’s gospel the focus is entirely on the author of the miracle. It is Jesus himself who distributes the bread, whereas in the other gospels the disciples do the distribution. Perhaps Jesus is the longed for Good shepherd, who will himself provide for the sheep?

There is a puzzling detail at the end of the miracle. Jesus insists that all the pieces that are left should be gathered up so that nothing is wasted. I wonder what is the significance of this? It could be that Jesus straightforwardly does not want to see good food wasted. Amen. Or, it could be that this food is special, it has a sacred quality, and it needs to be treated with special care – like the bread at Holy Communion. Or it could be that the gathering of the 12 baskets of food left over emphasises the scale of the miracle that has taken place? I’m not sure.

But the more significant thing is the reaction of the crowd. Alone amongst the four gospels St. John reports to us their reaction to the miracle. When they saw the miraculous sign they began to say: “Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.” And they were partly correct. Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 18 had spoken of a prophet who would come into the world who would speak God’s own words to the people. And that was indeed Jesus. He was indeed a new Moses, a new Elisha; he was the good shepherd for whom the people had longed. The crowd are reading the clues correctly, or so it seems.

But then in the very next verse we see that they have got it disastrously wrong. For we read: “Jesus knowing that they intended to come and make him King by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.” This is a huge blunder. Jesus was not, and could not be, merely a political figure, a human king. What’s more, the idea that they could “force” Jesus into a particular role indicates they really had no idea who they were dealing with. You cannot force the Son of God to be your king. You cannot instruct the sovereign Lord to take on a particular role for you. However much you need food or political freedom or a new leader – God’s Son stands above your needs and he acts as he will. And faced with manipulation by the crowd Jesus now *withdraws*. He returns to the mountain by himself. Here on the mountain, Jesus shares a lonely closeness with his heavenly Father, a closeness which deliberately withdraws from the crowd, because they do not understand who he is. The first miracle then, shows how the crowd fail to read the clues to Jesus identity correctly.

The second miracle is a fascinating complement to the first. Both miracles indicate Jesus control over nature – multiplying loaves, or controlling the storm. But the second miracle occurs only with the disciples, and it leads to quite a different

response. We read, verse 16, that when evening came the disciples got into a boat and set sail for Capernaum. It became dark, and Jesus hadn't yet joined them – presumably he was still alone on the mountain. Perhaps the disciples misjudged the weather conditions, because it became very windy and the lake became rough. The waters were now at least uncomfortable and maybe dangerous. These stormy waters are another clue – because in the Bible stormy waters signify chaos and danger and death. The Jews were not a seafaring nation, and they generally didn't like deep water very much. And it was very dark. Then when they are out in the middle of the lake, they see Jesus walking across the water. Naturally they are terrified. Not only is it dark and stormy on the lake, but there are ghosts too! But Jesus approaches the boat and tell them not to be afraid. And immediately, we are told, the boat reaches the shore. The danger disappears.

The words Jesus uses are unfortunately rather lost in translation. Verse 20: “It is I, do not be afraid.” In the Greek it is: “I AM, do not be afraid.” Now I AM, of course, is no ordinary expression: it is the name of God. In Exodus chapter 3 verse 14, when Moses asks God for his name, God replies, “I AM who I AM. Tell the people I AM has sent you.” So here in the walking on the water, we are given a very big clue to Jesus identity: “I AM; do not be afraid.” And, with the disciples, we are invited to realise that in Jesus we are dealing with no ordinary person. Who is this, person, this presence that walks upon the water? He is no mere human king; his kingdom doesn't come from this world: he is a divine being; he comes from God.

The disciples want to have this divine person with them. They welcome him and urge him to get into the boat. And a little later in the story, we see that they have interpreted the clues correctly. They have understood. John 6 verse 69, Peter says, on the disciples behalf: “We believe and know that you are the holy one of God.”

So, here are two contrasting stories. In the feeding of the five thousand, the *crowd* read all the clues but in the end disastrously misunderstand. They want to take Jesus by force and make him their king. In the walking on the water, the *disciples* respond with belief. In the first story, the crowd think they know who he is: he is a new Moses, a new Elisha, a new leader. But actually they don't understand at all – and he withdraws from them. In the second story, Jesus is a strange mysterious figure – approaching the disciples in the darkness. But the disciples see and believe. This time, he doesn't withdraw, he gets into the boat. And the danger disappears.

And for us, these two stories raise the question: who is Jesus for us today? Is he a miracle worker from a far off time, an exceptional human being able to do remarkable things? But someone at a distance, far away on a mountain? Or, is he for us the more mysterious, more awe-inspiring and more powerful figure who walks across the water to us? Who meets us in the boat on the stormy waters in the dark...and who climbs into the boat with us? The God who is truly with us, in the darkness and storms of life. And am I, are you able to respond with St. Peter, “yes we believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” Or to say with St. Thomas, after the resurrection: “My Lord and my God.” For it is only if we can do that, that we will have correctly read the clues, decoded the signs, and understood St. John's extraordinary story.