

A Diet of Bread and Water

Week 32 ~ Notes for October 23rd

Steve Logan

Background

Subject	Matt	Mark	Luke	John
5000 men fed	14:13-21	6:30-34	9:10-17	6:1-15
Walking on water	14:22-33	6:45-53		6:16-21
The 2nd <i>I am</i> statement				4:26, 6:20

The gospel stories this week are amongst the best known - walking on the water and feeding a big crowd with more or less nothing. So, what can we bring to this that might be new and interesting?

A Bigger Picture - Why?

For lifelong Christians some of these stories are so familiar that we don't really think about them anymore. We never ask the question '*Why* did Jesus do that?'. And the subsequent question '*Why* are there times when Jesus does nothing?'.

For example, we know about the story of freeing Paul and Silas from jail (Acts 16:16-34) and are content to treat this as a 'miracle'. But what about John the Baptist's similar problems with the local authorities that landed him in jail? That story does not end so well. In Matthew's gospel the beheading of John the Baptist immediately precedes the story of the feeding of the five thousand. In Matt 14:13 we are told that "when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself". He takes himself to a desolate place. Was Jesus upset by the news? I think the answer to that is obviously 'yes'.

So, let us ask: why were Paul and Silas freed and not John? Why did God/Jesus intervene in the former and not the latter?

Let's read on in Matthew. The crowds follow Jesus to that 'desolate place' and "he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick". It was getting late and Jesus performs the famous conversion of five loaves and two fish into enough food for 5000 or so men, plus an unknown number of women and children. Such was the bounty that, upon tidying up afterwards, the disciples "took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over".

Why ask "Why"?

Some preambles...

I'm a long time Christian and I'm also a scientist.

Much of science is about spotting **patterns**. If I do *this* action and *this* happens, and it happens every time I take that action - then I've found out something useful about the system. I've done some science.

As a result of my scientific background, I truly struggle with the (seemingly?) arbitrariness of understanding those occasions when God/Jesus intervenes and those when he does not. Where is the **pattern**?

Now there are those, most famously Steven Jay Gould, who propose that the 'rules' of science/rationalism should not be considered when looking at religion¹ and that, perhaps, looking for patterns is a fool's errand. I've always struggled with that notion.

When thinking about the 'why', two thoughts from previous VV discussions came to mind:

1. **Knowledge:** Last week Jim floated the notion that Jesus, in his human form, may not have had access to a full knowledge of what was going on in the rest of the world that was outside of his human field of view.
2. **Love:** Previously, in Week 26, we discussed a Telegram conversation about the correct translation of Mark 1:41. Was Christ 'indignant' or was Christ 'moved with compassion'? We, largely, favoured the latter. In fact, we concluded that Jesus' love for those he saw around him was a defining feature.

So, to my quandaries for this week:

- Did Jesus simply not know about the ill and hungry that were not directly in front of him (see point 1, above)? Or, maybe, did he have no ability to heal/feed such people remotely? I suspect that most VVers would dismiss this idea.
- We traditionally tell the 'feeding the 5000' story as an example of Christ's love and concern for those people who had come to hear him. Let me ask a hard question. If Christ is God and God/Christ is omni-present (ie everywhere at once) and he is all-loving then why does he not intervene in feeding the many thousands in Darfur, Bangladesh and countless other places in the world? *Why?*
- In both the beginning (v14) and the end of today's texts in Matt 14, Jesus heals "all who were sick" (v35). Those people who received healing had the benefit of being within walking distance of where Jesus was. Let me ask another hard question. If Christ is God and God/Christ is omni-present (ie everywhere at once) and he is all-loving then why does he not intervene in healing the many thousands in Lebanon, Syria and countless other places in the world? *Why?*

Traditionally we view Jesus' interventions in the world that was directly around him as being examples of his love and concern (often in marked contrast with the authorities of that time and place). This is a position on which I think we can all agree. But... This does not explain the specificity of Jesus' actions. Why does he intervene in what is happening in front of him but not intervene in, say, a sick person three valleys to the east?

Perhaps there's something else going on? Perhaps the point of the feeding and the healing isn't actually the feeding and the healing? Perhaps the *Why?* is to be found elsewhere? If so, *where!*

Bring your thoughts to the class!

¹Gould coined the phrase '[non-overlapping magisteria](#)' to describe this problem. To quote from Wikipedia: "science and religion each represent different areas of inquiry, fact vs. values, so there is a difference between the 'nets' over which they have 'a legitimate magisterium, or domain of teaching authority', and the two domains do not overlap."