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

**MATTHEW-088**. **THE FOOD OF THE WORLD by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"19.* *He gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples to the multitude. 20. And they did all eat, and were filled; and they took up of the fragments that remained twelve baskets full."*

*Matthew 14:19-20*

The miracles of Scripture are not merely wonders, but signs. It is one of their most striking characteristics that they are not, like the pretended portents of false faiths, mere mighty deeds standing in no sort of intellectual relation to the message of which they claim to be the attestation, but that they have themselves a doctrinal significance. Our Lord's miracles have been called the great bell before the sermon, but they are more than that. They are themselves no unimportant part of the sermon. In fact, it would not be difficult to construct from them a revelation of His nature, person, and work, scarcely less full and explicit than that contained in His words, or even than that more systematic and developed one which we receive in the writings of His apostles.

This miracle, for instance, of the feeding of the five thousand with five barley loaves and two small fishes, is one of the few which the Apostle John relates in his Gospel, and his reason for selecting it seems to be the commentary with which our Lord followed it, and which John alone has preserved. That commentary is all the wonderful discourse about Christ as the bread of life, and eating His flesh as our means of receiving His life into ourselves. We are warranted, then, in regarding this miracle as a symbolic revelation of Christ as supplying all the wants of this hungry world. If so, we may perhaps venture to take one more step, and regard the manner in which He dispenses His gifts as also significant. His agents are His disciples, or as would appear probable from the twelve baskets full of fragments, the twelve apostles, the nucleus and representatives of His Church. Thus we come to the point from which we wish to regard this narrative now. There are three stages in the words of our text--the distribution, the meal, and the gathering up of the abundance that was left. These three stages may guide us to some thoughts regarding the work to which Christ calls His Church, the success which attends it, and the results to the distributors themselves.

**I. Christ feeds the famishing world by means of His Church.**

He gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples to the multitude. One very striking feature in all our Lord's miracles is economy of power. The miraculous element being admitted for some good and sufficient reason, it is kept down to the lowest possible point. Precisely so much of it as is needed is permitted, and not one hairsbreadth more. It does not begin to make its appearance at any point in the process where ordinary human agency can be used. It does not produce a result beyond the actual necessity. It does not last one instant longer than is required. It inosculates closely with the natural order of things.

Take an illustration from the beginning of miracles where Jesus manifested forth His glory, at the marriage in Cana of Galilee--that great miracle in which our Lord hallowed the ties of human affection, and consecrated the joy of united hearts. The necessity is felt before He supplies it. The servants fill the waterpots. The water is used as the material on which the miraculous power operates. Only so much as is drawn for present use becomes wine. The servants are used as the agents for the distribution, and all is done so unostentatiously, though it be the manifesting of His glory, that no man knows but they.

Take another illustration from the other great contrasted miracle at the grave of Lazarus, where our Lord hallowed the breaking of earthly bonds by death, and sanctified the sorrows of parted love. He does not work His wonder from the other side Jordan, but comes. He does not avert the death which He will conquer, nor prevent the grief which He shares. He goes to the side of the grave--true human tears are wet upon His cheek. They have to roll away the stone. Then, there is flung into the darkness of the tomb the mighty word, Lazarus! come forth. The inconceivable miraculous act is done, and life stirs in the sheeted dead. But there the miraculous ceases. The man with his restored life has himself to come out of the grave, and human hands have tremblingly to lift the napkin from the veiled face (how they must have thrilled as they did it, wondering what nameless horror they might see in the eyes that had looked on the inner chamber of death), and human help has to unfold the grave-clothes from the tightly swathed and stumbling limbs, Loose him, and let him go.

This marked characteristic of all our Lord's miracles is full of instruction, which it would lead us too far from our present purpose to indicate at any length. But we may just observe in passing, that it brings these into striking parallel with the divine creative act, where there is ever the same precise adaptation of power employed to result contemplated, the same background of veiled omnipotence, the same emergence of proportioned, adequate, but not superfluous force, so that, in fact, economy of power may be said to be the very signature and broad arrow of divinity stamped on all His works. Again, it presents a broad contrast to the wild, reckless miracle-mongering of false faiths, and is at once a test of the genuineness of all lying signs and wonders, and an indication of the self-restraint of the Worker, and of the fine sanity and truthfulness of the narrators, of these Gospel miracles. And yet, again, it is one phase of the disciplinary character of the whole revelation of God in Christ--not obtrusive, though obvious, capable of being overlooked if men will. There was the hiding of His power. If any man wills to be ignorant, let him be ignorant.

But coming more immediately to the narrative before us, we find this same characteristic in full prominence in it. The people are allowed to hunger. The disciples are permitted to feel themselves at their witsend. They are bid to bring their poor resources to Christ. The lad who had come with his little store, perhaps a fisherman's boy from some of the lake villages who hoped to sell his loaves and fishes in the crowd, supplies the material on which Christ wills to exercise His miraculous power. The disciplesagency is pressed into the service. Each man separately receives his portion, and when all are supplied, the fragments are carefully preserved for the use of those who had been fed by miracle, and of Him who had fed them!

Besides the general lessons already referred to, as naturally arising from this feature of the miracle, there is that one which belongs to it especially, namely, that Christ feeds the famishing world by means of His Church.

Precisely as in the miracles in general, so in the work of Christ as a whole, the field of supernatural intervention is rigidly confined, and fits in with the established order of things. The Incarnation and Sacrifice of our Lord are the purely supernatural work of the divine Power and Mercy. He comes, enters into our human conditions, assumes our humanity, dies the death for us all. I have trodden the wine-press alone. There is no question of any human agency co-operating there, any more than there is in the word Lazarus, come forth, or in the multiplication of the loaves. There, by Christ alone, is brought to us and is finished for us an eternal redemption, with which the whole race of man have nothing to do but to receive it, to eat and be filled. But this having been done by the solitary work of Jesus Christ, this new power having been introduced into the world, human agency is henceforth called into operation to diffuse it, just as the servants at Cana had to draw the wine which He had made, just as the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias have to give to the multitude the bread which was blessed and broken by His hands.

The supernaturally given Bread of Life is to be carried over the world in accordance with the ordinary laws by which all other truth is diffused and all other gifts that belong to one man are held by him in stewardship for all his fellows. True, there is ever in and with that word of life a divine Spirit, which is the real cause of its progress, which guards it from destruction though all men were faithless, and keeps it alive though all Israel bowed the knee to Baal. But, however easy it may be for us to confuse ourselves with metaphysical puzzles about the relation between the natural and the supernatural elements--the human agency and the divine energiser--in the successful discharge of the Church's work, practically the matter is very plain.

The truth that it behoves us all to lay to heart is just this--that Christian people are Christ's instruments for effecting the realisation of the purposes of His death. Not without them shall He see of the travail of His soul. Not without them shall the preaching be fully known. Not without the people willing in the day of His power, and clothed in priestly beauty, shall the Priest King set His feet upon His enemies. Not without the armies of heaven following Him, shall the Word of Godride forth to victory. Neither the divine decree, nor the expansive power of the Truth, nor the crowned expectancy of the waiting Lord, nor the mighty working of the Comforter, are the complete means for the accomplishment of the divine promise that all nations shall be blessed in Him. Could all these be conceived of as existing without the service and energies of God's Church proclaiming the name of Christ, they were not enough. He has willed that to us, less than the least of all saints, should this grace be given, that we should make known the unsearchable riches of Christ. God reveals His truth, that men who believe it may impart it. God gives the word, that, caught up by those who receive it into an honest and good heart, it may be poured forth, in mighty chorus from the lips of the great company of them that publish it. He gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples to the multitude.

Christian men! learn your high vocation, and your solemn responsibilities. What! came the word of God out from you, or came it unto you only?For what did you receive it? For the same reason for which you have received everything else which you possess--that you might share it with your brethren. How did you receive it? As a gift, unmerited, the result of a miracle of divine mercy, that you might feel bound to give as ye have received, and spread the free divine gift by cheerful human work of distribution. From whom did you receive it? From Christ, who in the very act of giving binds you to live for Him and not for yourselves, and to mould your lives after the pattern of His. What a multitude of motives converge on the solemn duty of work for Christ, if we read in the light of this deeper meaning the simple words of our text, He gave the loaves to the disciples!What manner of servant is he who can bear to have no part in the blessed work that follows--and the disciples to the multitude?

It is further noticeable how these apostles were prepared for the work which they had to do. The first lesson which they had to learn was the almost ludicrous disproportion between the resources at their command and the necessities of the crowd. How many loaves have ye? go and see. And this is the first lesson that we have to learn in all our work for Christ and for our brethren, that in ourselves we have nothing fit for the task before us. Think of what that task is as measured by the necessities and sorrows of men. Think of all the sighs that go up at every moment from burdened hearts, of the tears that run down so many blanched and anxious cheeks. Think of all the misery that is done under the sun!If it could be made visible, what a dark pall would swathe the world, an atmosphere of sorrow rolling ever with it through space. The sight is too sad to be seen by any but by Him who cures it all, and it wrung from His heart the sigh with which ere He cured one poor sufferer--a drop in the ocean--He looked up to heaven, as in mute appeal against all these heaped miseries of suffering man.

And we, what can we do in ourselves? On what comparison of our resources do we not feel utterly inadequate to the work? If we think of the proportion in numbers, we have to say, like the narrator of the wars in Israel, The children of Israel pitched before them like two little flocks of kids, but the Syrians filled the country. If we think of the strength that we ourselves possess and look at our own tremulous faith, at our own feeble love, at the uncertain hold which we ourselves have on the Gospel that we profess, at the mists and darkness which cover so much of God's revelation from our own understandings, at the sins and faults of our own lives, must we not cry out, Send whom Thou wilt send, O Lord, but take not me, so sinful, so little influenced by Thy grace, to be the messenger of Thy grace? Who is sufficient for these things?And such contemplations, when they drive home to our hearts the wholesome lesson of our own weakness, are the beginning, and the only possible beginning, of divine strength. The only temper in which we can serve God and bless man is that of lowliest self-abasement. God works with bruised reeds, and out of them makes polished shafts, pillars in His house. Only when we are low on our faces before God, crying out, Unclean, unclean, does the purifying coal touch our lips and the prophet strength flow into our souls.

Be humble and self-distrustful, and then learn the further lesson of this narrative, and carry your poor inadequate resources to Christ. Bring them hither to Me. In His hands they become sufficient. He multiplies them. He gives wisdom, strength, and all that fits for the task to which He calls us. Bring your little faith to Him and He will increase it. Bring your feeble love to Him, and ask Him to kindle it from the pure flame of His own, and He will make your heart burn within you. Bring your partial understanding of His will and way to Him, and He will be to you wisdom. Bring all the poverty of your natures, all the insufficiency of your religious character, all the inadequacy of your poor work, to your Lord. Feel it all. Let the conviction of your nothingness sink into your soul. Then wait before Him in simple faith, in lowly obedience, and power will come to you equal to your desire and to your duties, and He will put His spirit upon you, and will anoint you to proclaim liberty to the captives and to give bread to all the hungry. Who is sufficient for these things?must ever precede, and will ever be followed by, our sufficiency is of God.

Mark again that the disciples seem themselves to have partaken of the bread before they parted it among the multitudes. That is our true preparation for the work of feeding the hungry. The Church which feeds the world is able to do so, only because, and in proportion as, it has found in Christ its own sustenance and life. It is only they who can say we have tasted and felt and handled of the word of lifewho can declare it to others. Personal participation in the bread of life makes any man able to offer it to some fainting spirit. Nothing else makes him able. Ability involves responsibility. Power to its last particle is duty. You, dear friends, who have tasted that the Lord is gracious, have thereby come under weighty obligations. Your own personal experience of that precious bread has fitted you to do something in offering it to others. The manner in which you do so must be determined by your character and circumstances. Every one has his proper walk; but something you can do. To some lips you can commend the food for all the world. Somewhere your word is a power. See that you do what you can do. Remember that Christ feeds the world by His Church, and that every man who has himself eaten of the bread of life is thereby consecrated to carry it to those who yet are perishing in the far-off hunger-ridden land, and trying to fill their bellies with the husks that the swine eat.

**II. The Bread is enough for all the world.**

They did all eat and were filled. One can fancy how doubtingly and grudgingly the apostles doled out the supplies at first, and how the portion of each was increased, as group after group was provided, and no diminution appeared in Christ's full hands, until, at last, all the five thousand, of all ages, of both sexes, of every sort, were fed, and the fragments lying uncared for proved how sufficient had been the share of each.

May we not see in that scene a picture of the full supply for all the wants of the whole world which there is in that Bread of Life which came down from heaven? The Gospel proclaims a full feast, which is enough for all mankind, which is intended for all mankind, which shall one day satisfy all mankind.

This universal adaptation of the message of the Gospel to the whole world arises from the obvious fact that it addresses itself to universal wants, to the great rudimentary, universally diffused characteristics of human nature, and that it provides for all these, in the grand simplicity of its good tidings, the one sufficing word. It entangles itself with no local or historical peculiarities of the time and place of its earthly origin, which can hinder it in its universal diffusion. It commits itself to no transient human opinions. It addresses itself to no sectional characteristics of classes of men. It brushes aside all the surface distinctions which separate us from one another, and goes right down to the depths of the central identities in which we are all alike. However we may differ from one another, in training, in habits, in cast of thought, in idiosyncrasies of character, in circumstances, in age--all these are but the upper strata which vary locally. Beneath all these there lie everywhere the solid foundations of the primeval rocks, and beneath these, again, the glowing central mass, the flaming heart of the world. Christianity sends its shaft right down through all these upper and local beds, till it reaches the deepest depths which are the same in every man--the obstinate wilfulness of a nature averse from God, and the yet deeper-lying longings of a soul that flames with the consciousness of God, and yearns for rest and peace. To the sense of sin, to the sense of sorrow, to the conscience never wholly stifled, to the desires after good never utterly eradicated and never slaked by aught besides itself, does this mighty word come. Not to this or that sort of man, not to men in this or that phase of progress, age of the world, or stage of civilisation, does it address itself, but to the common humanity which belongs to all, to the wants and sorrows and inward consciousness which belong to man as man, be he philosopher or fool, king or slave, Eastern or Western, pagan suckled in a creed outworn, or Englishman with the new lights and material science of this twentieth century.

Hence its universal adaptation to mankind. It alone of all so-called faiths overleaps all geographical limits and lives in all centuries. It alone wins its trophies and bestows its gifts on all sorts and conditions of men. Other plants which the Heavenly Father hath not plantedhave their zones of vegetation and die outside certain degrees of latitude, but the seed of the kingdom is like corn, an exotic nowhere, for wherever man lives it will grow, and yet an exotic everywhere, for it came down from heaven. Other food requires an educated palate for its appreciation, but any hungry man in any land will relish bread. For every soul on earth this living dying love of the Lord Jesus Christ addresses itself to, and satisfies, his deepest wants. It is the bread which gives life to the world.

And one of the constituents of that company by the Galilean lake was children. It is one great glory of Christianity that its merciful mysteries can find their way to the hearts of the little children. Its mysteries, we say--for the Gospel has its mysteries no less than these old systems of heathenism which fenced round their deepest truths with solemn barriers, only to be passed by the initiated. But the difference lies here--that its mysteries are taught at first to the neophytes, and that the sum of them lies in the words which we learned at our mother's knees so long ago that we have forgotten that they were ever new to us: God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but should have eternal life. The little child who has learned his earliest lessons of what father and son, loving and giving, trust and life mean, by the sweet experiences of his own father's home and his own mother's love, can grasp these blessed words. They carry the deepest mysteries which will still gleam before us unfathomed in all their profundity, unappropriated in all their blessedness, when millenniums have passed since we stood in the inner shrine of heaven. Wonderful is the word which blesses the child, which transcends the angel before the throne!

This is the bread for the world--meant for it, and one day to be partaken of by it. For these ordered fifties at their Christ-provided meal are for us a prophecy of the day that shall surely dawn, when all the hunger of wandering prodigals is over, and the deceived heart of the idol-worshipper no longer drawing him aside to feed on ashes, they shall come from the East and from the West, and from the North and from the South, and sit at the feast which the Lord hath prepared for all nations, and when all the earth shall be satisfied with the goodness of His house, even of His holy temple.

**III. The Bread which is given to the famishing is multiplied for the future of the Distributors.**

They took of the fragments that remained twelve baskets full. More was gathered than they had possessed at first. They preserved over, for their own sustenance and refreshment in days to come, a far larger store than the five loaves and two small fishes with which they had begun. The fact contains a principle which is true about almost all except material possessions, which is often in God's providence made true about them, and which is emphatically true about spiritual blessings, about our religious emotions, our Christian beliefs, the joys and powers which Christ comes to give.

For all these, the condition of increase is diffusion. To impart to others is to gain for oneself. Every honest effort to bring some other human heart into conscious possession of Christ's love deepens one's own sense of its preciousness. Every attempt to lead some other understanding to the perception of the truth, as it is in Jesus, helps me to understand it better myself. If you would learn, teach. That will clear your mind, will open hidden harmonies, will reveal unsuspected deficiencies and contradictions in your own conceptions, will help you to feel more the truths that come from your lips. It will perhaps shame your cold appreciation of them, when you see how others grasp at them from your teaching, or give you more confidence in the Gospel as the power of God unto salvation, when you behold it, even as ministered through you, mighty to pull down strongholds. At the lowest, it will keep your own mind in healthy contact with what you art but too apt to forget. If you would learn to love Christ more, try to lead some one else to love Him, You will catch new gleams from His gracious heart in the very act of commending Him to others. If you would have your own spiritual life strengthened and deepened, remember that not by solitary meditation or raptures of silent communion alone can that be accomplished, but by these and by honest manful work for God in the world. The Mount of Transfiguration must be left, although there were there Moses and Elias, and the cloud of the divine glory and the words of approval from heaven, because there were a demoniac boy and his weeping, despairing father needing Christ down below. Work for God if you would live with God. Give the bread to the hungry, if you would have it for the food of your own souls.

The refusal to engage in such service is one fruitful cause of the low state of spiritual health in which so many Christians pass their days. They seem to think that they receive the bread from heaven only for their own use, and that they have done all that they have to do with it, when they eat it themselves. And so come all manner of spiritual diseases. A selfish, that is an inactive, religion is always more or less a morbid religion. For health you need exercise. In the sweat of thy brow thou shalt eat bread; that law expresses not only the fact that work is needed to get it, but that toil must give the appetite and fit the frame to digest it. There is such a thing as a morbid Christianity brought on by want of healthy exercise.

There is that scattereth and yet increaseth, and there is that withholdeth more than is meet, and it tendeth to poverty. Good husbandry does not grind up all the year's wheat for loaves for one's own eating, but keeps some of it for seed to be scattered in the furrows. And if Christian men will deal with the great love of God, the great work of Christ, the great message of the Gospel, as if it were bestowed on them for their own sakes only, they will have only themselves to blame if holy desires die out in their hearts, and the consciousness of Christ's love becomes faint, and all the blessed words of truth come to sound far off and mythical in their ears. The standing water gets green scum on it. The close-shut barn breeds weevils and smut. Let the water run. Fling the seed broadcast. Thou shalt find it after many days, bread for thy own soul--even as these ministering apostles were enriched whilst they gave, and the full-handed liberality with which they carried Christ's gifts among the crowdhad something to do in providing the large residue which filled their stores for days to come.

Thus, then, this scene on the sweet springing grass down by the side of blue Gennesaret is an emblem of the whole work of the Church in this starving world. The multitudes famish. Tell Christ of their wants. Count your own small resources till you have completely learned your poverty, then take them to Jesus. He will accept them, and in His hands they will become mighty, being transfigured from human thoughts and forces into divine words, into spiritual powers. On that bread which He gives, do you yourselves live. Then carry it boldly to all the hungry. Rank after rank will eat. All races, all ages, from grey hairs to babbling childhood, will find there the food of their souls. As you part the blessing, it will grow beneath His eye; and the longer you give, the fuller-handed you will become. Nor shall the bread fail, nor the word become weak, till all the world has tasted of its sweetness and been refreshed by its potent life.

This miracle is the lesson for the workers. There is another wondrous meal recorded in Scripture, which is the prophecy for the workers when they rest. The little ship has been tossing all the night on the waters of that Galilean lake. Fruitless has been the fishing. The morning breaks cold and grey, and lo! there stands on the shore One who first blesses the toilerswork, and then bids them to His table. There, mysteriously kindled, burns the fire with the welcome meal already laid upon it. They add to it the contribution of their night of toil, and then, hushed and blessed in His still company, they sup with Him and He with them. So when the weary work is over for the Church on earth, we shall be aware of His merciful presence on the shore, and, coming at the last safe to land, we shall rest from our labours, in that we see the fire of coals, and fish laid thereon and bread; and our works shall follow us, in that we are bidden to bring of the fish that we have caught. Then, putting off the wet fisher's coat, and leaving behind the tossing of the unquiet sea and the toil of the weary fishing, we shall sit down with Him at that meal spread by His hands, who blesseth the works of His servants here below, and giveth to them a full fruition of immortal food at His table at the last.