

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: St John Chapter 6: Some Notes

One aspect of this chapter is the issue of miracles. For some folk, any Bible miracle is simply that: a God event that breaks all the normal God rules. If a bad tempered prophet is mocked by children and calls on God to revenge him, and a bear appears and kills the children, this is a God miracle. Others will say that if this story has any truth in it all, that truth can be that the children were unlucky enough to encounter a bear shortly after being rude to the prophet. The “miracles of course” folk are probably happy to accept big fish swallowing prophet as a miracle rather than a picture story; along with lions not eating a prophet; and Noah packing all creatures onto a boat which seemed unlikely to float.

At the other end of the spectrum are those who believe in God but don't believe that God ever breaks God's own rules incorporated in God's creation. These folk might well question both Virgin Birth and Resurrection. Probably, most believers would take an in-between position: accepting some miracles/signs as miracles, and regarding others as powerful stories but not actual miracle events. Where do we stand?

The first Chapter 6 miracle is that of the loaves and fishes – the cheap barley loaves and the common small dried fish. (This is a marmite sandwich feeding story, not a posh banquet story.) It isn't just the anti-miracle folk who have questioned the miracle aspect. Their key argument is probably that it is really very unlikely that only one small boy would have set out with a picnic for a day with Jesus. This is supported by the fact that the Disciples themselves each had a basket – the well-known Jewish bread basket that Jews on a journey traditionally carried with them on their travels. The “critics” point out that it would be a miracle if, inspired by the small boy and Jesus, the better provided had shared their food with each other so that the less well provided had enough to eat. There are also hints of the Eucharist, in which a very little food counts for a great deal. On the other hand, Jesus does say later on in the chapter that the crowd were more anxious for another free meal than to hear and obey the Word of God. What do you think?

The second Chapter 6 miracle is walking on the water. This one is really interesting. It seems that the boat had actually nearly completed its journey when Jesus appeared – the shore was within reach. Even more striking, the Greek says Jesus walked along the shore. So Jesus had watched the boat from his vantage point, kept it in sight, and called out to reassure the Disciples. This particular miracle story also raises the issue of whether Jesus ever did miracles just because he could. In the temptations in the wilderness, the devil tried very hard to get Jesus to do big, but rather purposeless miracles; and he refused. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus told Peter he could have summoned an army of angels, but that he wasn't going to take the easy way out.

As regards the popular demand for “signs”, it was a Jewish expectation that the Messiah would repeat the manna miracle – assuming that the manna was “food from heaven” (and

not a natural phenomenon) [and that the quails were a miracle and not a migratory phenomenon].

Jesus' challenge to the crowd is also a challenge to us. Human beings have a strong instinct to go for a Messiah that lives up to their expectations: making them feel better about themselves, enhancing their economic welfare, giving them abundant good health, putting them in the front row of the stalls (or the Royal Box), ensuring their enemies get their come-uppance.... None of that was the experience of the first disciples. They got a cross to carry. Though he slay me, yet will I trust him, was more the reality of things.