

Pentecost XI: Matthew 14:13-21: The Feeding of the Five Thousand

1. This miracle (called a σημεῖον by John) is recorded by all four evangelists, the only miracle recorded by all four. Jesus' great Galilean ministry began with the imprisonment of the Baptist (Mt. 4:12). Jesus left Judea not because He feared Herod. Nor does Mt. 4:12 mean that Jesus did not care about the Baptist. He left John alone to testify, even to the point of death. But He sustained John in his testimony. At Mt. 14:13 we are told that when Jesus heard of John's death, Jesus went into seclusion. This marks the end of the great Galilean ministry. Jesus was not a sentimentalist about burial. He did not rush to attend John's committal. He once said: "Let the dead bury their dead." Burial is a necessity, not a religious rite.
2. From the Gospel of John (6) we know that the feeding of the 5,000 took place just before the Passover. Jesus was only one year from His death. He was at the pinnacle of His popularity. But popularity did not mean approval. People came in droves but we know from John that they only wanted an earthly king, a bread-Messiah. But Jesus squelched this by going into retirement with His disciples. He spent His last year especially with His disciples, informing them three times of His impending death, burial and resurrection. The so-called Travel Account in the Gospel of Luke covers this last year in detail.
3. Vs. 13: Ἀκούσας refers in the first instance to vss. 1-12. Very likely it also refers to Mk. 6:30, the report of the Twelve on their special mission in Galilee on which Jesus had sent them as recorded in Mt. 10. The remainder of vs. 13 does not mean that Jesus was running from Herod but that He was seeking a sequestered place to be alone with the disciples. ἀκούσαντες proves that Jesus did not proceed in a secretive manner. We know from the Gospel of Luke that the sequestered place was near Bethsaida, on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. People came in droves on foot from the surrounding towns.
4. Vs. 14: ἐξελθὼν surely does not mean "out of the boat" but rather "coming forth from the sequestered place". εἶδεν clearly denotes Jesus' humanity. Mark tells us that He had compassion on them because they were as sheep without a shepherd, going about aimlessly and lost. Both Mark and Luke also tell us that He taught them much and spoke to them about the Kingdom of God. Both Matthew and Luke tell us that Jesus healed the sick. Matthew uses the term ἀρρώστους "those without strength". αὐτῶν is likely a genitive of relationship. Meditate on the difficulty of bringing these sick people from the towns out to where Jesus was! Ylvisaker: "The Synoptists call attention to the fact that Jesus first provides for the spiritual needs; but He is not unaware of their bodily requirements, as well." Fahling: "The sad feature of it was that it was not a Savior-seeking, but a miracle-seeking crowd." Lenski: "It means much that, in spite of all the unbelief that Jesus encountered and in spite of his intention to withdraw from his great public activity, his heart should thus be moved at the sight of this crowd that had followed him." True. Despite Jesus' preaching of the Gospel and healing their sick before the miraculous feeding, despite the miraculous feeding itself, when Jesus gave the lengthy discourse (John 6) concerning the fact that His flesh and blood (divinity attributed to His humanity) give life to the whole world, all but the disciples left Him. Despite all of this unbelief and rejection, Jesus fed the 5,000. Does Jesus' love cover all men? It surely does.
5. The Synoptics tell us about the end of the day when the worried disciples ask Jesus to dismiss the 5,000. John evidently also includes what happened earlier in the day. John says that as the people were approaching, He, knowing already then what He was going to do, asked Philip a question simply to test his faith. Philip's answer, involving two hundred denaria, is reiterated later (Mk. 6:37) by all the disciples. John also includes an observation by Andrew. Later in the day, when all the disciples

suggest that the people be sent away to find food, Jesus says that dismissal is not necessary and tells the disciples (Matthew, Mark, Luke) to feed them. Thus again He tests their faith. Everything that Jesus says, in all four Gospels, to the disciples, tests their faith to make them look to Him as the Provider. But they fail. The only test they "passed" was obedience to the command to have the people sit down and then to pass out the food. This is recorded in all four accounts.

6. Vs. 15: The first three words are a genitive absolute denoting time, evening. The disciples are worried. Ἐρημος means "deserted" in the sense that no people live there. καὶ means "and furthermore". The disciples want to have Jesus rid them of a problem by dismissing them so that the people can help themselves. ἑαυτοῖς is a reflexive pronoun, dative of advantage.
7. Vs. 16: δὲ is plainly "but". ἀπελθεῖν is exegetical to the noun χρεῖαν. Jesus is saying: "That this place is deserted and that the hour is late, these facts do not cause a need." And then follows a command which, word for word, is identical in Matthew, Mark and Luke. "Give to them YOU to eat." ὑμεῖς is emphatic. φαγεῖν is a substantial infinitive "food". Bengel is of the opinion that Jesus means for them to exercise the extraordinary powers which Jesus bestowed on the disciples when He sent them out on their mission (Mt. 10). That may be. But Jesus alone (vs. 14) on this occasion healed the sick. At any rate, Jesus is testing their faith. Very plainly He is expecting them to find help in Himself.
8. Vs. 17: δὲ is again plainly "but". "We don't have here (anything) except five loaves and two fish." Evidently they bought these from the little boy mentioned in Jn. 6:9.
9. Vs. 18: Matthew alone reports this verse. He is saying that they should have known from the beginning that He would provide. Incidentally, Mt. 16:5-12 is interesting at this point. There Jesus was condemning and warning them about the false, hypocritical teaching of the Pharisees. Fahling remarks: "But, as usually was the case, the disciples were dense. . . . Where were their eyes to see, their ears to hear, their minds to remember, and their hearts to understand? Even if His reference had been to physical bread, would there have been any cause for worry?" Stoeckhardt quotes from Luther: "The great need of the disciples on this occasion was that, though they could think and figure, they did not believe or realize what kind of Lord they had in Christ. And that is the universal need even today, not only when we need food but also when we realize all sorts of necessities. We know how to figure and calculate carefully so that our needs might be filled. But when help does not come immediately as we would like it, we get nothing out of our careful figuring and calculating except sorrow and loss of spirit. It would be much better for us to commend the whole matter to God and not think so much about our needs." Jesus condescends to their smallness of faith when He says: "Bring them here to Me."
10. Vs. 19: In this sentence we have three sequential circumstantial participles, then a main verb, then another sequential participle, then another main verb. The verb in the final clause is elliptical. Mark and Luke tell us that not only did Jesus order them to recline on the grass but that they should also do so in an orderly fashion so that bread and fish could be distributed in orderly fashion. Jesus overlooked no detail. Jesus' humanity is clear in the words ἀναβλέψας εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν. He prayed as at Jn. 11:41,42. There He states that the Father always heard His prayers. Jesus' divinity is clear in the word εὐλόγησεν. By communication of attributes His humanity was given the power to multiply loaves and fishes. κλάσας, He even broke for the sake of distribution. The final verb ἔδωκεν is powerful. God gives, gives, gives. With μαθηταῖ we must supply ἔδωκαν. Man can give to man only if and when God gives, whether a man believes it or not.

11. Vs. 20: The first καὶ is "and then" and the second "and so". Note the word πάντες. No one was overlooked. ἐχορτάσθησαν is usually used of animals which eat to the full. That is the point here. The third καὶ is again "and then". The subject of ἦσαν is, of course, the disciples. τῶν κλασμάτων is partitive genitive. The last three words are the direct object with the word πλήρεις coming emphatically at the end. The left-overs amounted to many times more than the original five loaves and two fishes. Lenski makes the interesting point here that each disciple had a basketfull and each then ate from his own basket, each supplying a little for Jesus. If that is true, and it makes good sense, the disciples fed Jesus from the remainder of that which Jesus had miraculously supplied in the first place. "Give the Lord at least a little of what He gave you in the first place."
12. Vs. 21: This verse is a parenthetical thought. (That does not mean that it is not important.) of ἐσθίοντες denotes the people. The participle is substantive. It means "the diners". Our translations wrongly translate "those who had eaten", making the participle aorist in tense. Note ἄνδρες which means "adult males". χωρὶς makes plain that the women and children are not included in this number, but surely implies the women and children were present. Commentators rightly point out that, if one computes one child and one woman for every man, there could have been at least 15,000 people present.
13. In keeping with the principle laid down by the Lord in the OT that people were to gather enough manna just for one day and with the principle of "daily bread" enunciated in the Lord's prayer, this text plainly shows that the Lord filled these peoples' stomachs just for that one occasion. They did not take the remnants along.
14. From the Gospel of John we know that Jesus knew that these people were not true believers (Jn. 11:26) but only wanted their stomachs filled. He wanted them to know and believe that He was the life-giving bread from heaven without which they could not be saved. But they rejected this. But He did not refuse to give them food for their stomachs. This reminds us of Luther's explanation of the fourth petition: "God gives daily bread indeed without our prayer, also to all the wicked; but we pray in this petition that He would lead us to know it, and to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving." We think of Ps. 104:27.28: "They all wait for Thee, to give them their food in due season (the appointed time). Thou dost give to them, they gather it up; Thou dost open Thy hand, they are satisfied with good." (NASB). He withholds food from none. Read Jesus' word to Satan, Mt. 4:4. That is true whether man believes it or not. But His main purpose in performing the miracle was to have the eater look to the Redeemer, not merely the food.
15. Vs. 20 clearly implies that, though God gives much, man should not waste what has been given. The disciples, by gathering the leftovers, were an example to the wasters. That says much to Christians in our society which is so wasteful. We must be examples to them.