

## Five thousand people and a red paper clip

On 12 July 2005 Kyle MacDonald began trading his way to a house. He used a weblog to advise readers of his intention and people began to follow his trading through the internet. On that first day he managed to trade his starting item, a large red paper clip, for a fish pen in Vancouver. The fish pen was swapped for a ceramic door knob and the door knob was swapped for an outdoor camping stove. Next, the stove was swapped in New York for an electric 1000W Honda EX generator which in turn was swapped for a Neon Bar sign and a beer keg

The bar sign and keg were swapped for a snowmobile and the snowmobile was exchanged for a ski vacation which in turn was swapped for a van and the van was swapped for a recording contract and this recording contract was traded away for one year's free rent in an apartment in Arizona. Next Kyle swapped the rented apartment for an afternoon with rock star Alice Cooper, which he managed to swap for a snow globe featuring the rock band KISS. The snow globe was swapped by actor Corbin Bernsen for a role in his next movie 'Donna on Demand'. Then the town of Kipling Saskatchewan, keen to promote the municipality, swapped the movie role for a house. In the space of one year, Kyle McDonald was able to turn a paper clip into a house. It seems unbelievable. Who said miracles can't happen?

Jesus was able to feed a huge multitude with five loaves and two fish. He took what the people had, and with God's grace it was enough. But what was this miracle? Dietary laws were strict in New Testament times. Because there was fear of defilement in the event of contact with sinners or if unclean food was taken, regulations were strict about how food was to be prepared and eaten and with whom it might be safely shared. Careful ritual washings were necessary to avoid contamination.

Observant Jews avoided all contact with outcasts, sinners, pagans and non-observant Jews and they refused to share a meal with someone if they were uncertain about their moral and religious status. Because mingling with non-Jews was a fact of life for those living in the cities of Galilee and Judea, it became increasingly challenging to observe these laws.

This is important to recognize in appreciating that table fellowship was one of the distinguishing features of Jesus' ministry. His eagerness to share meals with "sinners" and "outcasts" was perhaps the most outstanding feature of his ministry. These meals Jesus shared with the outcasts were not simply occasions for preaching his message. They *were* the message!

This can help in understanding the miracle of loaves and fishes. For a miracle to have genuine religious significance it must transform the human heart. Curing a lame person is not as miraculous as curing a hardened heart or a despairing spirit and the great miracle of Jesus' ministry was reconciliation, with God and with others. Jesus did not perform tricks.

The story of Jesus feeding five thousand people suggests that those who had come to hear Jesus, brought no food with them. Since his audience would have been almost exclusively Jewish, it is likely that they would have taken the precaution of bringing with them enough bread or dried fish in order to faithfully observe the dietary laws. It would have concerned some law-abiding Jews that Jesus had a reputation for attracting and tolerating the socially marginalized, and eating their provisions in the company of such people would have been a risk. After preaching to the people, Jesus

invited them to sit down and prepare for a meal with those around them. Sharing a meal together like this was an opportunity to break down the religious and social barriers that Jesus had been preaching about. It was practice for living in the kingdom he spoke of. Jesus didn't just share the few loaves and dried fish and cause them to multiply. He gave thanks to God. This was his first act. Then He blessed the bread, broke it and passed it around. Here is Eucharist 'out in the open'. Everyone is welcome at this meal and there is enough 'food' for everyone in this all inclusive family

This was then that the miracle occurred. God opened their hearts, and they, in turn, opened their satchels, and the greatest miracle of all occurred. Jesus preached of God's abundant love and forgiveness and then invited those who heard his message to sit down together and live for a moment in the "kingdom" about which he was preaching.

The people knew the significance of Jesus' action. Faced with famine, Elisha had been given twenty loaves of barley which he directed be given to 'one hundred men'. When challenged that this was not enough, Elisha ordered that it be done and when they had all eaten 'there was some left over'. (2 Kings 4:43-44). Elisha had some food left over after he been able to feed one hundred people with twenty barley loaves. Now here was Jesus with twelve baskets of leftovers after he had fed five thousand people, with just five loaves of bread. How many people could Jesus feed? Five thousand, fifty thousand or five hundred thousand? There is no limit. God's abundance was here to be seen and people could share in providing for one another out of God's table of plenty.

The miracle created a new kind of community, generated by prayer and inclusion. Brief as it was, it was an experience of 'the kingdom'; 'a family for all'. Jesus miracle was the changing of the human heart. Has our heart been changed? Is our discipleship a matter of the head or the heart?

If we don't have enough tomato to give everyone a piece, or enough ham and pineapple so that everyone gets a serve, but we do have some flour, an oven and some cheese, we can make enough pizza for everyone. We can focus on what we don't have. The task can seem so big we can't get started. But if we open our hearts we can be part of the five thousand, sharing what we have and caught up in Jesus' vision of a family for all.

Paul says 'without love, I am nothing'. What is this love. Paul continues, "Love is patient and always takes the initiative; it is not jealous or boastful; nor arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but in the right. Love bears all things. Love is always ready to believe, always ready to trust, always ready to hope and always ready to endure anything. Love never comes to an end." What a miracle it would be if we showed that to our world. A Passionist family Group can help us begin!

Brian Traynor CP  
January 2007