

The Feeding of Thousands

We're poor but we are not fools.
Those who could brought wine and bread,
Little enough, each for himself,
And nothing to speak of to spare.
Only a beggar ventures into the bare hills
God knows how far
Breadless, to hear a prophet.

Most of what he said passed over me,
But this I remember well,
That even men and women like ourselves,
Scraping our livings from the dust,
Spring from a father in heaven.
Waking or sleeping his power guides
Our breath and blood,
And lives within our hearts.
No-one will miss his due.

He said,
Our Father is the root of love, ~
He, the strong, the merciful, is true, unseeking love.
What father, if his child ask bread,
Will give a stone? Should a single sparrow fall
Our father reckons it in heaven. Guess, then,
How much more he cares for you.
And know that this, his love, and nothing whatever else,
Is the one true bond of brotherhood between
People of every tribe and nation.

Bread! For God's love give us bread!
Called some poor hungry wretch,
And several dozens more behind him
Rose up demanding,
Prophet, bring us manna in the wilderness
As Moses did in olden time,
Life is bread. Bread, and nothing whatever else, is life.
We are nothing without bread.

I thought that they'd turn on him, but he
Standing his ground, surprised them into quiet.
You cry out just as you always cry.
First look and listen. Listen, then let's find
Among those stones
Bread for our brotherhood.

From close behind me came a scuffling boy,
A waif with a basket, holding
Two small fishes and five scraps of barley loaf, calling
 Master, take these for the people!

What use was that, to feed so many mouths!

He, not seeing the foolishness,
Took the gift as if it had been prince's gold,
And stood the boy beside himself to honour him.

I was amazed, then angry,
For after what this waif had done,
How could I myself not give?
Then, seeing the teacher standing
Beside this sparrow of a boy

I sensed some secret bond between them,
Mercy and trust, mercy and trust,
Longed to be part of it.
And so I placed before him all my careful store,
My bread, my wine-skin and my scraps of meat,
And the master welcomed me.

He broke the bread and fed
Those who were nearest in the crowd.
Some he put back into my hand, calling
 Half for your brother is enough,
 Those who provide, they too are bidden to the feast!

Seeing this, the man beside me opened up his pouch,
Taking from it bread enough for three.
This too the master broke and passed it on.
Another catching the mood,
Took two meal-cakes from his bag,
Sharing with the fellows at his side.

Then more folk came forward,
Each with a morsel to contribute,
For shame, or fear, or praise, ~ or was it brotherhood?
Others followed, each with a bite to share,
And each one passed it on.
So we, this multitude, began to feed
Each other and our selves,
Each with a piece to take or break,
Five thousand so they say.

It was the boy began it, this strange sharing

Between us hard-fisted, careful men,
For he alone

Opened his heart to what the master said.
And so, beginning one by one,
Watching each other, questioning first, then openly,
Dozen by dozen, score by score, then like wildfire,
Those who had anything to share
Gave it to the master's followers,
To be divided between those without.
So it continued, while the master
Freely walked among the riff-raff,
Accepting from one to feed another
Up and down the bare hillside.

They say the followers
Gathered up twelve baskets full of bits of bread
Left over when the people went away.
An old wives' tale perhaps, yet it was strange
How much there really was
In all those knotted bags and pouches
Carried by the multitude
That went to hear the prophet on the hill.

I gave away the bread he'd given back,
Keeping nothing for myself that day,
And walked home still unfed
Yet strangely satisfied,
For things beyond belief were seen that day
Amongst us hardened men who are not fools.
Bread came from stone. I call it a miracle.

