

Feeding the Five Thousand

“It was around the time of the Jewish Passover Feast, when the apostles returned from their mission. They gathered round Jesus and reported to him everything they had done and taught. But because so many people were coming and going, that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.” and they withdrew by themselves to a town called Bethsaida, where some of John’s disciples found him and told him of John’s death.

When Jesus heard about this, he wanted to be by himself, so, taking them with him, he crossed in a boat privately to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee to a remote, secluded place.

But many who saw them leaving recognised them and when the word got around, a great crowd of people ran on foot from all the towns and cities, because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick, many arriving there ahead of them.

When the boat landed Jesus went ashore, went up the mountainside and sat down with his disciples. When Jesus looked up and saw this great crowd coming towards him he said to Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. Philip answered him, “Eight months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!”

Jesus felt compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he welcomed them and began teaching them many things. He spoke to them about the kingdom of God and healed those who needed healing.

Late in the afternoon, *when it was almost evening*, the Twelve came to him and said, “We are in a remote place here” they said, “and it’s already very late. So send the crowd away so they can go to the surrounding villages and countryside to buy food for themselves and find lodging.”

But Jesus replied, "They don't need to go away; you give them something to eat!"

They said to him, "That would take eight months of a man's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?"

"How many loaves do you have?" he asked. "Go and see." Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"

And He said, "Bring them here to me."

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Make the men sit down in groups of about fifty each." There was plenty of grass in that place, and the disciples got the people sitting down, until everybody was sitting down on the green grass in groups of between fifty and a hundred.

He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up toward heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. He gave them to his disciples, and they distributed it to those who were all seated, as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish, dividing the two fish among them all.

When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted," and the disciples picked up twelve full baskets of broken pieces of the five barley loaves and fish, that were left over by those who had eaten.

There were about five thousand men who ate, besides women and children. After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, 'Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.'" (Matt 14:12-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17, John 6:1-14)

Jesus was indeed the Prophet, the Messiah, that God had sent into the world. But after this miracle the people wanted to take him by force to be their leader, but they only saw him as a free dinner ticket and had no understanding of his true mission. Messiah means the Anointed One, the one who would be anointed not with holy oil, like kings and priests, but anointed with the Holy Spirit and his power. His miraculous signs

showed that he was the Anointed One and that the powers of the Kingdom age to come were available in this world here and now.

He had sent out the twelve to do what he had been doing, to preach his message of the Kingdom and to heal the sick and cast out demons. They were amazed as people responded to their message and were healed and even demons left the demonised when they commanded them to go. All this even before the Spirit came on them at Pentecost! They were buzzing with stories and had loads to tell Jesus. But, as always, there were people constantly clamouring for Jesus' attention, and they were all tired and hungry so Jesus dismissed the crowds and made his way with the disciples to the fishing town of Bethsaida, on a hill a little way from the coast of the Sea of Galilee, near where the Jordan runs into the Lake. It was the home of Peter, Andrew and Philip, and there they presumably all managed to rest a bit and to get something to eat and drink. But some of John the Baptist's disciples found him there and they reported to Jesus the latest sad news of how John had been beheaded at Herod's birthday bash in his palace at Machaerus.

Jesus was upset by the news. John was not only a relation of Jesus' on his mother Mary's side, but he had been hugely instrumental in getting Jesus started in his ministry. John's death was also a reminder that his own death was not going to be that far away. He felt he needed some peace and quiet, time alone to reflect and to weep and to pray. So he called his disciples to finish their food, they were going off privately somewhere remote, away from everyone. They took one of the boats, probably, one of Peter's, and set off to the 'far shore' of Galilee.

But the news of their departure spread like wildfire and soon huge crowds of people were running around the lake until they could see where his boat was going to come to shore. Some already got there ahead of him, but he took his disciples up the hillside and sat down. The only chance he had to quietly ponder things had been on the boat, that would have to wait another day, as we will see next week.

Did Jesus get irritated with these people? Was he too tired to cope? Did he tell them to just go away and leave him alone? Not at all! He felt compassion for them. As he looked out over the crowd, he saw them

like sheep without a shepherd. So he welcomed them and began teaching them about the kingdom of God. And he healed all those who needed healing. Maybe after returning from their own successful trips the disciples were more than just spectators, as they had been so often, maybe they got involved with healing the sick alongside Jesus.

It was getting late and everyone was tired and hungry and they were in a remote spot just up from the beach, miles from the nearest town.

The disciples tell Jesus, "Hey boss, it's getting late. Enough is enough. Tell them all to go, so they can buy some food in the surrounding villages and farms, and maybe find somewhere to stay overnight." They never expected Jesus' response, "You give them something to eat". "You feed them".

How can we feed them; it would take 8 months wages to feed so many people and where would we get that. Jesus had already asked Philip, from Bethsaida, about feeding them when they had first arrived and saw the crowd coming. Right back then, Jesus knew that such a huge crowd would need something to eat. He doubted that many would have brought any food with them having set out to follow him on the spur of the moment, and he was testing Philip. He knew exactly what he would have to do to feed them in such a remote place.

A lad was found with a small picnic that his mum had no doubt prepared for him, just five loaves and two small fish. These were brought to Jesus who firstly told the disciples to get everyone sitting down. The men were to sit in groups of 50, which with the women and children made some groups as large as 100. There were about 100 separate groups sitting on the grass expecting something to eat. Jesus blessed the bread and broke it and kept breaking it and giving it out and it multiplied and the same happened with the fish.

This was not a new miracle. In the OT Moses had fed the nation with manna and Elijah and Elisha had multiplied flour and oil. And Jesus repeated it some weeks later with the feeding of the four-thousand.

The disciples distributed the food and as they gave it out it might well have continued to multiply in their hands – 5000 men plus women and

children was quite a lot of food. Afterwards we read how Jesus had them collect up all the scraps of food left on the grass. 12 full baskets! Enough for one each of his disciples. They often had challenges getting food to eat, living off the generosity of strangers. Would they have been able to eat it all before it went bad? Maybe it was like the manna that was supernaturally preserved from going bad if it was kept more than 24 hours but only on the Sabbath.

What was the point of this miracle? After the second feeding of the 4000 Jesus spoke quite sharply with them because they didn't seem to get the point. But he doesn't actually tell them what the point was!

Bible commentators have wondered what the point might have been; but many don't seem to get the point either! Mostly the point they suggest is that it proved that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. But in what new way does that instruct them? Even the crowds got that. There must have been some other truth that Jesus was getting at by these two very similar miracles.

Let me tell you what I think that Jesus may have wanted them to see. Jesus and his disciples met the physical need of these thousands of people far beyond their own resources. He tested Philip and his response was typical. He could only see things from a human perspective – God didn't come into his equation. It would need 8 months wages and where could we possibly find that much food. It is not possible. There was no human solution.

Didn't they know about Moses and Elijah and Elisha? Yes of course they did, but that was just a bible story and not relevant for us today. All it tells us is how powerful God is, that we can sing songs about. It says nothing about what God can do through us today. Wrong answer!

Jesus wanted them to realise that if God can do it through him he can also do it through them. Even the most meagre resources if offered to God can be multiplied over and over again. We are prone to see things from the perspective of human limitations and not from the perspective of God's abundance and limitless power. The young lad offered his lunch to Jesus and by the Spirit's power he got it back again and many more than 5000 people were fed and there were twelve baskets of

leftovers! What can the Lord do when we give to him what **we** have? Give, he said and it will be given to you pressed down, shaken together and running over. Whatever we give we invest in God's Kingdom, time money, energy, our possessions, our food.

Another significant statement Jesus made to these earthly-minded disciples was "**You feed them!**" There was a need and Jesus told his followers "You meet the need." There is massive poverty and hunger in this world today and some have heard the Lord's word, "You feed them". God is able to release remarkable resources when his people obey his command. There are many churches in towns and cities up and down this land that are now running foodbanks to provide food for the poor in this land. The Kerith Community Church in Bracknell do this and they get in an amazing amount of food contributed by all sorts of individuals from the community, not just believers or members of the KCC. They partner with front-line care professionals, who identify people in crisis and give them a voucher. When they take their voucher to the foodbank centre, they receive a warm welcome, a hot drink and a food pack with enough food to last for a minimum of three days and also personal support where necessary. In Exeter our old-friends Nick & Pat got involved with a foodbank supported by 13 churches of the city, 4 businesses and 17 local schools. Why is this necessary in the UK? Because 13 million people in the UK live below the poverty line. Every day people go hungry for reasons ranging from redundancy to receiving an unexpected bill on a low income. Last year the Trussell Trust UK foodbank network fed over 60,000 people. With over 100 foodbanks currently launched, seventy up and running, their goal is for every town to have one. This is a practical way in which the Christian community has been able to take a lead and partner with others in the community to do what Jesus said to his disciples, "You feed them". Bracknell is our local foodbank that serves our area and there is one in Slough and one in Farnborough. If you are interested in getting involved check out the websites of the Kerith Community Church or the Trussell Trust.

What does this passage mean to us? Don't look at what we can't do, but look at what God can do with our meagre resources, which he can multiply and use to help those who need help. We can all play some

small part - not necessarily in feeding the hungry – but in feeding those who are dying of spiritual hunger. We have CEx coming up this Autumn and we need people to help with running the course and even more those who can invite their friends, colleagues, neighbours, contacts and family to go on the course and hear the good news about Jesus. We need to pray and ask God, what can I do. The easy thing is to dismiss it – I don't know anyone - It is too hard – It takes eighteen months before someone is ready to accept an invitation to such a course – I'm a helper I can't share the gospel. The young lad had five loaves and two little fish. Do we have a mouth? Do we have a voice? Do we have people we know? What can the Lord do with the little we have? How can he multiply our meagre resources? Could you give a few hours next week to help with the CAOS! week? Who knows how God can multiply our small contribution to impact and 'feed' others?

Let us get out of the habit of putting ourselves down, of minimising what contribution we can make and believe that if we give our small contribution to Jesus, what will he make of it; how might he multiply it? Look at how five loaves and two little fish in his hands and with his faith in the power of God working through him fed 6, 7 8 thousand people and fed the disciples for days after! Let us step up and not back down.

Ecclesiastes 9:10 urges us, "*Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might,*" while we have time and energy, wisdom, knowledge and understanding, let's use our skills, our abilities, our gifts and whatever our hand finds to do let's do it with all our might, while we have life.

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