

2 August 2020 – Trinity 8

Matthew 14: 13-21

Feeding of the Five Thousand

How many times have you heard or read the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand? You have probably encountered it many times over the years. But what does it mean to you? We will each have our own interpretations of what seems to have happened and what it meant then and for us today.

As so often with our Gospel readings, it's essential to take account of the context. We know that the Gospels were written some years after Jesus' death and resurrection. The four Gospels vary substantially in how they record the actions and sayings of Jesus. Remember also that they only offer us a snapshot of three very intense years. As with any record of events, only a tiny fraction of what happened at any one time is recorded and remembered.

Take our own time as a prime example. However assiduous a follower you are of television and radio news, newspapers and all the myriad of other media through which world events are propagated, you will only absorb the tiniest fraction of what actually happened throughout the world today. How can the experience of several billion human beings be captured in any meaningful way?

Instead, we have our own personal experiences alongside what little we can glean about what everyone else has been doing. We recall little of our own experiences, let alone those of everyone else.

If we remember that the Gospels were written some years later, it is surely significant that all four Gospel writers include the feeding of the five thousand, and all four place this immediately after reference to John the Baptist. Matthew, Mark and Luke all relate the death of John the Baptist, while John's Gospel refers to the legacy of John and his mission in relation to that of Jesus.

Remember too that John the Baptist and Jesus were cousins, were very similar in age, and almost certainly grew up together. John and Jesus probably spent much of their first thirty years in each other's company. We can imagine the impact that news of John's death had on Jesus. We can sympathize that he would want to escape the crowds and have a bit of time to reflect on what had happened and the likely impact on his own mission. In the Gospel we read that Jesus **'withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself'**. You probably seek personal space at times of crisis or despair or sadness. We know how people like to go to a place like a church building, to sit quietly and absorb what has happened to them.

Jesus however had little respite. The people soon found out where he was and came to seek his help and to hear what he had to say. Jesus could have moved on again to escape their attention. He could have told the people to go away and leave him in peace. But no. **'He had compassion for them and cured their sick'**. He met their needs right up to the evening. Even in the evening, when his closest followers suggested that the people be sent into local villages to find food, Jesus sought to meet their needs.

So there's one lesson for us. Even in times of our own distress, Jesus shows us that we can still reach out to others to meet their needs. That's one lesson clearly learnt these past few months. We have all become much more conscious of each other's needs. Every one of us has had to adjust our lifestyles. Many have been seriously distressed though mental stress, ill health, bereavement, job loss and so many other uncertainties. Yet at the same time, we have seen a flowering of care and concern for others. Perhaps we can take a leaf out of Jesus' book and ensure that that care and concern does not fade away again as the pandemic subsides.

Jesus is faced with a dilemma. He doesn't want to send the people away to fend for themselves. But how was he going to feed five thousand people adequately? Surely not with the five loaves and two fish that the disciples had laid their hands on? That appeared to be all

that there was available to feed everyone. We can't know how the five thousand had their hunger satisfied, and in many ways, it really doesn't matter precisely how it happened.

What **IS** important is that Jesus accepted the five loaves and two fish, all that was on offer. In just the same way, Jesus accepts whatever **WE** have to offer, however small it may seem to us. Our role is to offer what we have, for without that Jesus cannot achieve his mission.

Quite what happened next is beyond our understanding. We are told that Jesus looked up to heaven, blessed and broke the loaves and then the disciples were able to distribute enough food to satisfy everyone. Even more amazingly, we hear that there were twelve baskets of crumbs left over after all the people had gone home. How could this be? We don't know and it's foolish to speculate.

More important than idle speculation is the lesson for us. Each one of us individually has a small offering to make for the furtherance of the Kingdom of God. We are like the loaves and fishes. Alone, we cannot feed the multitude. But if we offer whatever we have to Jesus, we know that he will use that offering in a way that we cannot fathom. Our small offering is a vital part of Jesus' mission. It's a valuable contribution. It is welcomed by Him. It is used by Him. We don't know what impact our offering will have. We will probably never know. We look back to those who came before us from whom we have received the message of the Gospel. Who's to know what our words and our actions will do to pass on that same message to the generations to come.

We are so fortunate to be able to worship in the two church buildings in our parish. However, since March, we have learnt even more clearly than we already knew that a building is not essential for worship. We have explored, and we continue to explore, other ways of sharing worship as a Christian community, and bringing the message of the Gospel to others. Our eyes have been opened to the possibilities presented by all the technologies that are now around.

While our parish community remains rooted in our church buildings, we need to continue our exploration of the new opportunities to deepen our faith and to reach out to others. One of the many things that we have learnt is that we cannot continue to assume that people will want or indeed need to come to our churches or any other building as the focus of their worship.

To reach out – to make our small offerings really count – we have to be bold. We have to find ways of relating the Gospel to the world of 2020. If our loaves and fishes are to reach the multitude before us and around us, we have to make them accessible and relevant. Somehow, Jesus turned that tiny offering into something that satisfied the needs of the thousands before Him. Somehow, we too have to work out how to satisfy the searching and longings of our generation and those to come.

The changes forced on us in recent months by the pandemic, and the imminent arrival of a new Rector, is the ideal opportunity to start this process. The Ministry Team and the Church Wardens have been thinking through how we can, as a parish, adjust and adapt to the changed world that now faces us. We will involve everyone once we have laid foundations. It will require trust in each other, a willingness to engage in the process, a preparedness to compromise, and to give our time and our energy to the process. We can't foresee the outcome, but we each have to play our part. Without the loaves and fishes that we each bring, we can't achieve as much as we would wish. We will rely on and value everyone's contribution. The hungry 'five thousand' are out there. Our mission is to engage with them and satisfy their hunger.

Amen

John Smith