

Matthew 14:13-21 Sermon

I love the feeding of the 5000.

It's a great mix of rich theology and imagery and the care that God, in Jesus, has for his people. In the past, some theologians have sought to spoil the story by suggesting that it's simply a case of people sharing their packed lunches, but this idea doesn't do justice to the story as it is presented for us. Firstly, it is in all four gospels, which wouldn't make sense if it was made up or actually just a case of shared picnics: multiple witnesses lends weight to historicity. Instead, all those who record these events, record them in the genre of historiography – that is, they mean you to read it as if it happened. They give numbers and details – like the number of fish and loaves – which aren't symbolic, but simply are recorded because that's what happened. So, as we approach the story, please dismiss the previous generation's strange and biased sense of shared lunches, and either read this as historical fact, or at the very least, as the writer wanting you to read it as historical fact. To do anything else is doing damage to the reading.

On the surface of the reading, John the Baptist has just been beheaded and Jesus, in response, is seeking time alone with his friends. Whether that's for grieving or as a kind of lying low while a difficult political situation blows itself out, we aren't told, and it could be a bit of both. Either way, the crowd follow him and what was meant to be a retreat turns into a large ministry session lasting into the evening. Perhaps Jesus was so busy healing people he lost track of time, or perhaps he knew the time and was so committed to helping people he didn't care as the sun began to sink towards the horizon. What we have here is a picture of God's compassion for his creation, but also God's determination that his people, the followers of Jesus, are to be an important part of this compassion – Jesus tells his disciples to find something for the crowd to eat. The disciples are determined to make the best of a difficult circumstance by sending the crowd away to fend for themselves, but for Jesus, this isn't good enough - God's people need to ensure that the crowd are helped rather than simply directing them elsewhere.

For the disciples, this was impossible. All they could gather was five small barley loaves and two dried fish – the typical lunch of two or three peasants. They come back to Jesus despairing. An important lesson is learned – the followers of Jesus are to have compassion and serve the needs of God's created people, but they cannot do it in their own strength. They come to Jesus and he meets everyone's needs.

So Jesus takes over, and the story gathers a momentum of its own and theological symbols start appearing all over the place. The crowd are ordered to 'sit down' – the word used for reclining at a banquet. Jesus then thanks God for the bread and gives it to his followers to distribute, similar to what he does at the Last Supper. He takes the role of the head of a household, almost like he is instituting a new family of followers. Everyone eats and are filled – literally, 'stuffed' like after a feast – and then baskets of food leftovers are collected. Nothing is wasted, and the amount of food scraps left far exceeds the food they started with. The number of people is not exaggerated – instead it is an underestimate since the disciples didn't bother to count the women and children. What we see therefore is God providing for his creation, and the followers of Jesus learning lessons about faith, compassion, and being unable to do things under their own strength.

That's what is happening on the surface – and we can learn the same lessons as the disciples learned. However, if we look deeper there is even more going on here.

This story is full of undertones for those who, like the crowd would have been, are steeped in their scriptures. The crowd would have spotted what was going on, so it is important that we do too. In short, Jesus is portraying himself as the new Elisha, a great prophet of old, and the new Moses – something we talk about when we think about Jesus fulfilling the ‘law and the prophets’ – and he is setting up a preview of the end of days when God will feast his people in his new creation.

Firstly, there’s Moses. In Exodus, Moses leads God’s people out of Egyptian slavery and they go wandering around in the wilderness. Inevitably, they get hungry – in the middle of nowhere with nothing to eat – exactly like the crowd in this story. Moses prays and God sends manna – bread from heaven – to feed the people. They get their ‘daily bread’ and rely on God’s compassion for them. Here, Jesus is like Moses, but rather than simply providing for need, he is lavishing food on the crowd. There are so many leftovers, that if you are in the crowd stuffed full of food, you’d be thinking manna from heaven – but on steroids!

Second, there’s Elisha, the prophet, who in 2 Kings 4 multiplied some bread to feed 100 people. It is a very similar situation, except that here Jesus, rather than multiplying by a factor of 5 as Elisha does, multiplies by a factor in excess of 1000! Like with Moses, Jesus is similar to this prophet, but on a different and much more lavish scale.

If you are sitting in the crowd chewing on your bread, these events would be pinging around in your head. Jesus seems to be repeating and also developing and exaggerating God’s history with his people.

But he’s not simply doing that, he’s also preparing a future. The crowd would know their Isaiah prophecies and know that when God comes to live with his people there will be a massive banquet. Jesus has already played with this imagery in some of his parables and there are plenty of Jewish writers from around the period who also use these images. It is definitely in everyone’s imagination as they sit eating their divine picnic. This Godly dinner is a moment of looking forward to the final return of God to his people – a banquet so lavish that it goes on forever where people recline and are stuffed – hence the use of the language from earlier – and where even the meagre peasants’ food is changed into the food of feasting.

So Jesus is connecting with figures from the past, exceeding Moses and the prophets, and giving a glimpse into the future - a day when God lives with his people. At the same time as all of that, he also rehearses some of the same language from the Last Supper as he creates a new family, centred around him, who will be sustained by his bread whilst they look for the final banquet of God.

We are that family. We inherit, even now, the body of Jesus, given for us at communion. We follow Jesus, the new Moses who exceeds and fulfills the Old Testament law, and who exceeds and fulfills the prophets. And we look forward with anticipation to the banquet of God – a feast we have already tasted, and which we serve within, until the day that God comes in full. Until that day, we are Jesus’s disciples, called to serve those whom Jesus puts in our way, not reliant on our own strength but trusting God to work through us, knowing that he provided before and he will provide again. That’s what it is like to be part of God’s family. That’s who we are. Isn’t it exciting! Amen.