

Sermon 6 August 2023 Feeding of the Five Thousand

Matthew 14:13-21

There are some stories in the Bible I struggle to get my head around in terms of practical reality. Noah's ark is one example, as is this story of the feeding of the five thousand. But first, let's set the scene for this story.

It is important to understand just what has happened to Jesus, or rather what has happened to his cousin and friend, John the Baptist. John has been cruelly beheaded by Herod, albeit at the whim of Herod's wife and her daughter. Jesus has just heard of this so it would be fair to say that he would be in quite a fragile state. We get an indication of this in the opening passage – *'Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.'* So Jesus, having received the terrible news, needed some space. Very understandable.

Jesus had feelings, just like you and me. This is another very good example of his humanness. This is important in the context of what happens next. Jesus has attempted to get away for some personal space but no luck. A very large crowd follows him and we are told this crowd is well over five thousand people. Can we just pause here because this does raise a very interesting point.

The five thousand refers only to the men, but there were many women and children there as well – verse 21, *'And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.'* So why is that? Very simply because women and children didn't really count, in this case, literally. It was a male-orientated, male-dominated society, and this has all sorts of implications for Jesus' ministry and the stories that arose from his life and ministry. We can't go into that now but it is certainly a reminder of this particular aspect of the society of this time.

So Jesus wants to get away for a little peace and quiet, some space to reflect on the very sad news he has just heard. And remember this, not only would he be feeling sad at the loss of his cousin, but it would also be a timely reminder of the dangers he was facing from the authorities. But this personal time was not to be. The crowds followed him and wanted a part of him. It would be natural for him to feel just a little aggrieved and to send them away, but of course, he doesn't. On the contrary, he reaches out to them, healing and ministering to them.

Then comes the high point of the story. The crowd are hungry but what are they going to eat? Someone comes up with five loaves of bread and two fish. Not a problem to Jesus. He blesses them and the five thousand-plus people are fed. This, of course, is where I struggle to get my head around this story. So I ask myself, what is the message here? Because therein lies the truth.

As I see it, there are two main messages here. Firstly, God is capable of absolutely anything. So in that context, there is no reason why this story could not have unfolded just as it is relayed to us. The message for us is believe and you will be surprised at what you can achieve, or as Jesus put it a little later, *'I assure you, even if you had faith as small as a mustard seed, (there is that mustard seed again!) you could say to this mountain, "Move from here to there, and it would move. Nothing would be impossible."'* Matthew 17:20.

The second message is that Jesus is able to meet our every need (that is inherent in the actual loaves and fishes that are fed to everyone), and most importantly, he has more than enough to nourish us all (that is inherent in the twelve baskets of scraps left over). Again, there has to be a strong element of faith here. When we have the faith to put ourselves in his hands, he will meet those needs, whatever those needs

might be. I quote from our first reading, *'Give all your worries and cares to God, because he cares for you. And after you have suffered for a little while, he will himself restore, support, strengthen, and place you on a firm foundation.'*

However, it goes further than just meeting our needs. Undoubtedly, we all face challenges in our lives and these will be of a varying nature. There is also no doubt that as people of faith we face the constant challenge as to how we can further God's work in our community, or as I put it last week, to establish a corner of God's kingdom in our community. It is a challenge and the only way to deal with that challenge is to put ourselves in God's hands through prayer, and most importantly, accompany our prayer with action.

Our prayer must be, *'Lord, give me the strength and guidance to play my part in bringing this about,'* not, *'Lord, could you please bring this about.'* God helps those who help themselves. As we have frequently said, if we all play our part in our own small way, we can make a difference. I refer to last week's story of the little boy who asked the air force to drop off his bottle of aspirin to Dr Schweitzer's hospital in Africa, and this began an avalanche of donations of medical supplies to his hospital. I relate another story.

A group from a church had gathered together to pray for a family who were in desperate need of food. The prayer meeting had just got under way and there was a knock on the door. A young boy was standing there. He said, *'My father said to tell you that he can't come to pray because he is too busy unloading his prayers at the Jones' house. He said to tell you that he is taking some beef, a sack of potatoes, a box of apples and some jars of jam. He said he couldn't be here to pray, but that he has taken his prayers and unloaded them at their house.'*

Now that is prayer in action. That is faith in action. Let me put that in the context of our food bank here at St Paul's. If every single one of us, every time we did the grocery shopping, bought one item for our food bank, the sum total would be quite something. Having said that, I want to commend you on what you do provide. Trust me, it is greatly appreciated.

I just want to emphasise the point that it is through every one of us doing our little bit that we can make a significant difference. We might not, figuratively speaking, feed five thousand on our own, but through faith in action as a faith community, we can make a big difference, and in so doing, carry out God's work in our local community.

Let me finish by reflecting on a quote from Mahatma Gandhi, *'What is faith if it not translated into action?'* I would like to add my own take on that quote with another quote, *'To be valid, prayer must translate into faith in action.'* One of the messages from the feeding of the five thousand is that if we have faith, God can surprise us by what he can help us to achieve. He can even help us build a new church! Now there's a thought.

Rev Warner Wilder