

**Sunday - 15<sup>th</sup> July 2018 - 9.15 am**

**John 6. 1-14**

**Mark 6. 30 - 44**

*Almighty God, as you fed your people with bread and fishes, feed us now with your living word. Amen.*

I wonder if you thought that someone had got the wrong reading – well no – I chose that we should hear the same story twice! To my surprise I think I have never preached before on the Feeding of the Five Thousand – strange when you think what a popular story it is! And I couldn't decide which version I wanted to speak on today – so we heard two different ones. For this miracle is the only one which appears in all four gospels. Now, if I was a different sort of person there could follow a learned discussion on the origins of each gospel – the Synoptic gospels . . . and then John's gospel, Matthew and Luke developing themes from Mark and then the existence of Q – that likely additional source of writings which lead to the similarity but not identical nature of the first three gospels.

But I want to adopt a broader (and narrower) approach to the story and first I want you to know why we're thinking about it today at all!

That's because it is a great focus for our service later at 11 o'clock, when we have 11 children and young people being admitted to receive Holy Communion for the first time. There are four from St George's (who will be here in force, having cancelled their service). And we have another couple of boys who will be baptised and admitted at our August 11am Communion service who were unable to be here today. Two of those who are being admitted today will also be baptised this morning. What a great couple of mornings in prospect!

And the children will be acting out the story of the feeding of the five thousand as our Bible reading later today but you got the rather more traditional version - twice! Unusual I know, but interesting – if you listened carefully. If I hadn't chosen to hear this story twice, top contenders for the other Bible Reading were the story of God supplying the Israelites in the wilderness with manna from heaven, helped by Moses (Exodus 16) or Elisha's feeding of a hundred people with just twenty loaves (2 Kings 4.42-44). These are both examples of generosity and abundance which reflect God's acknowledgement of our physical needs, his love for us and bends our minds a little as we wonder how it was done! They are both obvious Old Testament accompaniments to our story this morning.

So, I wonder if I had asked you earlier this morning to tell me the story of the feeding of the five thousand in your own words, what parts you might have included. Some of the details - if you could run to any - would have been in some versions but not in others. Leaving aside the versions of Matthew and Luke which are similar to Mark's (as you'd expect) we will take a look at the interesting variations which were in the two different accounts we heard.

First of all let's just settle the parts which all four versions share in common:

- Jesus goes to a certain place and is met there by a great multitude, numbering (at least) five thousand;
- the need to feed the crowd emerges;
- only five loaves and two fish are available;
- a command is given for the people to sit;
- Jesus takes the bread and offers a blessing/gives thanks;
- the food is distributed;
- all the people eat until their hunger is satisfied;
- twelve baskets of leftovers are collected.

Those indeed are the bare bones of the story but what other details shed light on the whole event and give extra depth of meaning?

The first thing to consider is the context of the story. In Mark it appears immediately after John the Baptist has been beheaded and Jesus has lost his beloved cousin. He is a man in mourning, as are the disciples. These friends needed time out together, so they tried to leave the crowds behind. But this was in vain, as they were followed. Ironically, trying to get some peace and quiet led them to a greater number of people! And yet, Jesus' reaction was one of compassion. Mark tells us that he saw the crowd as *'sheep without a shepherd'*. This is an echo of Moses' request when he asks the Lord to appoint a successor to him so that the Israelites will not be *'like sheep without a shepherd'*. (Nums 27.17) And despite his tiredness and his pain, Jesus responds to that multitude in love and begins to teach them. There is no such equivalent in John.

When we read what happens next in Mark, it is *'once it is late'* and it is the disciples who express concern about the hungry crowd who need to be fed. Jesus's response is one of challenge and turns it back on them. He tells the disciples *'You give them something to eat'*.

In John, it is Jesus who raises the problem, for it's important for John that Jesus takes the initiative. He must be shown to be in complete command, not baffled by what to do next. John wants us to know that Jesus knows exactly what he intends to do, even though he takes the opportunity to test his disciples. And it's not the general 'disciples' but named individuals who feature in John's account – Philip and Andrew to be precise. John's account is full of these details which leave an impression.

But whatever the differences, in all the accounts the disciples are left incredulous at the nature of Jesus' task for them. How could all these people possibly be fed in the middle of a deserted place (or up on a mountainside – take your pick) as night is falling. The unlikely answer comes in two different ways.

According to John, Andrew introduces a boy to Jesus who has five loaves and two fish. These loaves are barley loaves just like the loaves which Elisha shared in the story I mentioned a bit earlier – another Old Testament reference which this time John gives us. And we also know from John's account that this was likely to have been a poor boy, for barley loaves were a cheap alternative to wheat back in those days. But five loaves and two fish – that sounds like a big meal for one boy! Was he perhaps hoping to sell them to the hungriest and highest bidder in the crowd? Did he come forward freely with the stash or did Andrew frog-march him unwillingly to his Master, almost to call out Jesus' preposterous suggestion! We don't know – and it's a fascinating aspect of the story. If you look at our stained glass window, depicting this story over there, you tend to think (perhaps a little romantically, as perhaps we all do) that the boy came forward generously, was somehow ordained by God to play a significant part in this story. John's account tells us more than the others but leaves us asking more questions!

By contrast, Marks records that the disciples come back to Jesus with five loaves and two fish once he had told them to do a reccie to see what was available amongst the crowd.

And both versions of this part of the story can be taken as instruction on what we should do, when we are stumped about what to do next. When there is an apparently insuperable problem – the starting point is to bring what we have back to Jesus. We can't know what he's going to do with it but the expectation given to us by this story is that God's actions through Jesus then and through the Holy Spirit today, will be creative and generous, life affirming and working for the good of the many.

But back to our story. Jesus takes the initiative and orders the crowd to sit down - Mark tells us, in groups of 50. The suggestion here is that Jesus is almost ordering the crowd to sit down in military formation - why the groupings? Is this Jesus marshalling the 'troups'? Is this the Messiah who will soon lead, like a soldier, against the Roman occupying forces?

Before the food is distributed we must notice a couple of other things. John has told us that the Jewish feast of Passover was near, Mark tells us that the grass which the crowds sat down upon was 'green'. In different ways both accounts locate the story close to Passover. So, as we shall see, the story of Passover is clearly referenced. These events seem to foreshadow it. And it is this Jewish festival which will be recalled at the Last Supper, Jesus' final meal with his disciples. And we get an even clearer reference to this when Mark writes that Jesus took the loaves (and fish) blessed them, broken them and gave them out to be eaten.

Take, bless, break, give/eat. [act]

This is the shape of our Eucharist – our celebration of thanksgiving which we call Holy Communion. The bread is taken, blessed/prayed over/given thanks for, broken and distributed. And so it has been through the celebration of Communion across the intervening years. It is as if the bread, which at the Last Supper was taken, blessed, broken and given has multiplied over the years to feed many, many more than just five thousand. So the story of the miracle becomes our story as it includes us in the sharing of the bread of Communion into the ambit of Jesus taking, blessing, breaking and our eating. There is almost an invisible thread running through our miracle story, the Last Supper and onto our celebration of Holy Communion later today – especially as we welcome children into joining with us in that celebration – and spread the blessing wider.

And after the meal? Well everybody has eaten until their hunger was satisfied and there are still 12 baskets of left overs! This story abounds with overflowing provision and abundance. The cynic might enquire what had been in those 12 baskets before. For many seek to dismiss or explain away the miracle by arguing that there were those in the crowd who had brought their own supplies and Jesus' action was as much about encouraging generosity as a miracle over very limited resources.

As we thought about the context of this story when we began, so we must look at what follows. For some there is another miracle – Jesus walking on the water. But in John we are then taken on a step further in the linking of both miracles together with Jesus' discourse on the bread of life.

*'I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never be hungry and he who believes in me will never be thirsty'.*

That sermon was addressed by Jesus to those who had eaten their fill of the loaves but whom Jesus says should look instead for the food which endures to eternal life. That's in part, what Jesus did at the Last Supper in offering his disciples the bread and wine as a way to remember him – using ordinary everyday items from the dinner table and investing in them significance far beyond their usual value.

That's why we are thinking of the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand this morning. Because in St Matthew's we will recall the feeding of the five thousand plus all those believers who (since the Last Supper) have, in faith, followed our Lord's command to *'Do this in remembrance of him'* - taking the broken bread and wine outpoured of Holy Communion. And this morning there will be eleven more of us! Please pray for them today and in the weeks to come– for Ellis and Elliott, Kamran, Myles, Philip, Daniel, Evie, Emma, Alfie, Oliver and Anna and next month for Thomas and Luke.

Amen