

The Feeding of the 5000

Sermon preached by Rev Christopher Harrison on 2nd August 2020 at All Saints' Nottingham (Trinity 8)

What is the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand all about? At first sight, it is a dramatic demonstration of Jesus' divine power, and of his compassion for thousands of people who had heard him teach for several hours and were then hungry. But is there more to it than this? What was Jesus saying and doing, on a deeper level, when he performed this miracle? And how did the gospel writers interpret it?

We're no doubt familiar with the miracle itself. It is the only miracle of Jesus which is described in all four gospels. In the account given in the gospel of St Matthew, which we have heard today, when the disciples can't find enough food for the crowds of people who had been listening to him teach, Jesus takes five loaves and two fish, and transforms them into enough for all to eat, with twelve baskets left over. This miracle seems to have had a particularly profound impact on the people of the time. In St John's parallel account we read that as a result of it, people began to say, surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world. But I invite you this morning to reflect also on the following points:

- Remember how God fed the Israelites with manna, on their way to the promised land, led by Moses, having escaped from slavery in Egypt. Jesus is therefore being compared to a new Moses.
- Indeed there is evidence that some of the Jews expected that when the Messiah came there would be a repetition of the miraculous feeding of the people at the time of the Exodus: 2 Baruch 29.7 - And it will happen at that time that the treasury of manna will come down from on high, and they will eat of it in those years because these are they who will have arrived at the consummation of time.
- There is also a parallel with an episode described in 2 Kings 4 when the prophet Elisha feeds 100 men with 20 loaves of barley baked from the first ripe grain, with some left over.
- In Jesus, therefore, we see the ancient Jewish law and the prophets brought together, and as the gospel progresses it is increasingly clear that he is the long-awaited Messiah.
- The gospels of Luke and John have one description of the feeding of the multitude; Matthew and Mark, however, each have two. The one we have heard today is Matthew's first; the second comes in the next chapter. Are these just duplication? No: they are set in different places: the first is thought to have been set on the western - ie Jewish - side of Lake Galilee, with the second (the feeding this time of 4,000) being set in Gentile

territory. The first refers to twelve baskets of bread left over, which have traditionally been linked with the 12 tribes of Israel. So Jesus is being portrayed as a Messiah who came for both Jew and gentile (non-Jew).

- From the earliest days the Christian church also saw the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 as prefiguring the Eucharist, which Jesus was to give the Church as a way of remembering his life, death and resurrection. Notice how Jesus followed the same sequence of actions as take place in the Eucharist - he took bread, blessed it, broke it, then distributed it. In St John's gospel the story of the feeding of the 5,000 is followed by a long discourse by Jesus who identifies himself as "the bread of life".

In the Eucharist today Jesus sees people who need to be fed - spiritually - and feeds them with the bread of life - bread which is broken, which is blessed by him and which represents his body. The Eucharist is a particular time of blessing for anyone who receives the bread and the wine, for in the Eucharist we receive spiritual food which will satisfy our innermost needs. Whenever we receive the bread of the Eucharist, blessed by God, we receive the bread of life - Jesus himself.

It is thought that the feeding of the 5,000 occurred during the spring, for St John's gospel tells us that there was a great deal of grass in the place. Later on in the year, in the summer, there tends to be little or no grass, for it only rains between October and April. Spring, however, was Passover time, so perhaps in John this miracle is presented as complementing that first saving act of God when through Moses he led the Ancient Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. In the same way, Jesus too leads people from being enslaved by sin into "the kingdom of God", both here on earth and also in the realms of heaven.

And just as the natural world is abundant during Spring with new foliage and blossom, so in this miracle Jesus reveals the abundance of God's goodness. Jesus didn't provide just enough to keep away the people's hunger; there was much more than enough to go round. This is in itself a parable of the kingdom of God; it describes the abundance of the spiritual riches which we enjoy when we live according to Jesus' instructions to show love, mercy and compassion to all, both friends and enemies.

For some people today, miracles can be stumbling blocks to belief. It is entirely right, then, that we ask ourselves, 'How exactly did Jesus perform this miracle? Was it a direct expression of his divine power? Or was it perhaps that the impact that he and his teaching had on people was so strong that a new and abundant spirit of sharing arose amongst those who were present, which meant that nobody went hungry'. We don't know for sure, but that's the nature of miracles. Whatever the case may be, however, I hope we can also see this miracle as an example of how

Jesus' miracles have traditionally been seen as pointers to deeper truths, which convey crucial messages about who Jesus was and how we should understand him.

"If you have eyes to see, then see," said Jesus. "And if you have ears to hear, then hear." So let's open our eyes and open our ears afresh, in order that through the miracles of Jesus we can indeed see more clearly the divine nature revealed in human form, the Messiah, who is no less than God incarnate. Amen.