

Sunday 2nd August 2026

Genesis 32:22-31

Psalms 17:1-7

Romans 9:1-5

Matthew 14:13-21

One Sunday morning a Vicar forgot the notes for his sermon. In the middle of his sermon, he got a few of the facts a bit twisted. He said that the Lord took 4000 loaves and 6000 fish and with them fed 24 people, and had plenty left over. Suddenly someone in the congregation called out, "Anybody could do that!" "Could you?", asked the vicar. "I certainly could", replied the man. After the service the vicar complained about the heckler's conduct, but he was told of his error by the deacon. "Well, next week I'll remember my notes, and I'll sort out that man!" he said. The following Sunday, with notes in his hand, the vicar stepped up confidently to deliver his sermon. During the sermon he brought up again the miracle of the loaves and fishes. He told how five loaves and two fish had probably fed as many as 24,000 people. Thinking he'd get one over on the heckler from the previous Sunday he pointed to him and asked, "Could you do that?" "Of course I could!", claimed the heckler. "And just how would you do that?" asked the vicar. The heckler replied, "With all the loaves and fishes left over from last Sunday!"

Feeding people out of our abundance is, as the heckler points out, easy – we can all do that and have done that. Feeding people out of our poverty and scarcity is quite a different matter. And yet that is what happened in our Gospel today. From very little that was available to Jesus, the multitude are fed and satisfied.

Over the last couple of weeks our Gospel readings has presented us with various sayings and parables of Jesus about what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. It's been compared to sown seed, a field of wheat and weeds, a mustard seed and some yeast, hidden treasure, a precious pearl and a fishing net. From these various metaphors and images, we can glimpse something of the values and nature of God's Kingdom as has been previously explored, and today's Gospel builds on these parables by putting into practice some of this teaching.

A thought struck me as I reflected on this passage, and that is the fact that it is not an easy passage to preach on. Because it is so well known, it is difficult to find anything new to say. So, what to say about this miracle, which incidentally is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels – so, clearly of high significance for the gospel writers. For me there are 2 themes that come through strongly, both of which resonate with our current circumstances and are regularly in the news; The themes are Compassion and Hospitality.

Matthew comments that Jesus had compassion for the crowd and cured their sick. The word translated compassion has its roots in the language of sacrifice and was originally used to designate the inner parts of the sacrificial animal.

Eugene Peterson in his Message version of the bible, translates the same word as used in the parable of the Good Samaritan with the phrase “his heart went out to him”. Other commentators suggest the phrase “gut-wrenching” compassion. What the original colourfully and clearly conveys is the depths of Jesus’ compassion.

And what is remarkable about this, is the context of this compassion. In the first part of chapter 14, Matthew tells the story of the beheading of John the Baptist. So - Jesus has just learnt that his cousin John the Baptist has been beheaded. He is grieving, and, in response, seeks a quiet, deserted, out of the way place on the other side of the lake. Only to be confronted on his arrival by a crowd of quite substantial size – “5000 men besides women and children.” Yet all day he heals the sick.

And the healing and busyness comes at a physical cost to Jesus. He is then confronted with a request from his disciples to send the crowd away so they can do some late-night shopping for food. Jesus, of course, says there is no need. In fact, Jesus says to the disciples – “you give them something to eat.”

Now I don’t know about you, but when I am both sad and tired, I am not at my best. Irritable only begins to capture it. But Jesus only seems to be more compassionate the more he has to contend with. What does the miracle say to us about the character God?

Firstly, I think that this miracle says to us that God is a God of extraordinary compassion, who cares for every one of us. I am struck by how much this miracle, and this day in the life of Jesus is about the physical – about keeping the body alive and well. And for you and I the challenge is how can we show compassion even when we feel inadequate, when we ourselves are struggling in life?

Some people are able to get this right in their lives. I think of Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Mother Theresa, and so many others – we see in them Godly compassion.

And secondly, we see the incredible hospitality shown by Jesus in this miracle. Jesus embraces all who were there and cares for their needs in that situation. No one was ignored or left out.

I’m reminded of the difficult time during the Covid-19 pandemic when there was extreme isolation. A lot of people really struggled with the isolation and the lack of contact and interaction with others. Hospitality is at the heart of this miracle. Matthew records – “And all ate and were filled: and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, 12 baskets full.”

Matthew sets this outdoor meal in direct contrast with the feast that is recorded in the first 12 verses of the chapter. The feast that Herod hosts is a feast of death. The feast that Jesus hosts is a feast of life. Herod's feast is for the exclusive few; lavish; riotous; over the top; and ending in the death of John to preserve Herod's reputation as a man who keeps his word.

By contrast, look at the ingredients of the meal where Jesus is the host: -

- It is inclusive. No-one is left out. ALL ate and were filled.
- It is generous. Not only is everyone satisfied but there are 12 baskets left over – one for each of the 12 tribes of Israel – a pointer to the reality that God provides sufficient for everybody, and then some. God is a God of abundance.
- It is the product of scarcity. All that is available is 5 small loaves and two fish. We are told elsewhere that they are barley loaves, the food of the poor – wheat was too expensive. Enough for one, maybe two people at most. Yet Jesus takes these in his hands, blesses God the provider, breaks the loaves and the feast begins. Out of scarcity, God provides plenty. Even though the resources we have, or our skills, may be lacking, God uses the scarcity we offer in His service, and the results can be miraculous.
- It is a meal of fellowship. Jesus only seems to hold centre stage for a short time, as he blesses the loaves and breaks them. From then on, it is the disciples who give the crowd something to eat.
- It's a prophetic meal. Some biblical commentators see this miracle as a pointer to The Last Supper. But also, it was held by some that The Messiah would repeat the provision of manna in the desert as the Israelites journeyed to the promised land. This meal is a repeat of that provision. The message is that this man Jesus is himself the true bread of life.

So - What is our response to this call?

"Send them away." This is the disciples' first response to the hungry crowd, and it makes perfect sense. There wasn't enough food, money, or time to solve a problem this big.

Then Jesus says something unexpected: "You give them something to eat."

The disciples look at five loaves and two fish and see too little. Jesus looks at the very same meal and sees where to begin.

I am sure that we all look at our calendars, our resources, our abilities, and wonder if they'll ever be enough.

But Jesus has never asked us to begin with enough. He simply asks us to bring what we have – to come as we are. And somehow, in his hands, ordinary gifts become more than we ever imagined. Because Jesus doesn't begin with what we lack. He begins with what we've placed in his hands.

As we stand in the shoes of the disciples in Matthew's account, we are called to obey Jesus' daring, ridiculous command. We are called to offer our limited resources to him to bless and multiply. Then he challenges us to take responsibility, not to hoard them for ourselves, but to distribute them to others. Resources could be money and possessions, but they also include time, energy, innate abilities and acquired skills – our giftedness.

This story challenges us to get up out of our comfortable chairs and throw ourselves into offering our resources on behalf of a needy world. It calls us to remember and to anticipate, to stand in the story, looking back and looking forward to instances of divine nourishment.

We are to look back to the manna in the wilderness and forward to the Lord's Supper, re-experiencing who God has been in the past, anticipating who God will be and what God will do in the future. This is what we do when we participate in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist – the Lord's Supper.

Godly Compassion combined with Godly Hospitality make Jesus "the perfect host" in this impromptu picnic, an event which encourages us to a way of life where we are motivated by deep caring for others and a desire to share God's abundance.

All made possible by feeding on Jesus the bread of life.

This is something that we can all do on a practical level – by participating in our Jesus Cares initiative of feeding destitute families. We may not all be able to afford to fill a bag, but we can all at least contribute something to wards feeding the needy. I challenge us all to make a difference!

Amen.