

## Matthew 14 v13-21

So here is a very familiar story. If you had to give it a strap line (just from this story) what would you say it was about?

- It's important to share?
- God can use what little we have?
- Jesus as human having compassion on hungry people?
- No problem is too big for God?
- Jesus is truly the son of God?
- Jesus as man acting with the help of an almighty God?
- Jesus showing God was at work in history again?

Before we start lets pray.

*Lord Jesus, through this familiar story challenge us, through this familiar story, increase our faith, through this familiar story shift our sense of what is normal and sensible. Give us a glimpse of your kingdom economy and may we be excited to be part of your kingdom breaking into our world here on earth.*

Of all the miracles of Jesus, this is the only one that appears in all four of the gospels. This seems to me to be very strong evidence that something very important happened on that day. Something so striking that an account of Jesus's life and ministry would not be complete without reference to it.

Briefly the context before we start – that raises a couple of key questions to me.

In Matthew and Mark's gospels it is recorded after Jesus's cousin John (the Baptist) had been beheaded by King Herod at the request of a fickle girl who presented his head to her mother on a plate. The disciples had buried his body and then told Jesus.

To me that is really interesting. Jesus did this in the context of his cousin having been beheaded, when we would be asking where is God in this? This godly man, John, absolutely key in preparing the way of the Lord, now beheaded in an apparently meaningless circumstance. And yet Jesus – holding to the goodness of God, holding to his purpose and calling, continues to speak about the kingdom of God!

Question for us: When life falls apart around us, when things happen that make absolutely no sense, when the good and the godly are murdered, when God appears to be sleeping or worse, HOW do we hold on to the truth so that we too can keep on speaking about the Kingdom of God!

If we read the story in Luke it comes as the disciples had returned from being sent out by Jesus in pairs where they preached the gospel and, the bible says "healed people everywhere." And yet, how thick are they in this story!! How come?

Question for us: When we see the goodness of God in our lives, how come we so quickly forget and decide that we must take things into our own hands for fix?

So let's look at this miracle as Matthew records it (BTW- only John mentions the little boy offering his lunch)

The miracle had an air of spontaneity about it – it was prompted by the physical needs of the people and was done by Jesus in response to the events that were unfolding before him.

But was it only about feeding hungry people – or was it about something more than that?

Well, it probably rings bells for us. It probably triggers memories about other stories to do with feeding people. Do you remember Moses who promised the Israelites bread and it came in the form of manna, which rained down six days a week to provide them with the sustenance they needed in the desert.

The prophet Elisha experienced similar provision of bread. Do you remember? (2 Kings 4 v38 on) Let me read it to you.

The context is that there was a famine in the region:

*“One day a man came from Baal Shallishah bringing Elisha twenty loaves of barley bread baked from the first ripe corn along with some heads of new corn. “Give it to the people to eat” Elisha said. “How can I set this before 100 men?” his servant asked. But Elisha answered “Give it to the people to eat, for this is what the Lord says. They will eat and have some left over.” Then he set it before them and they ate, and had some left over according to the word of the Lord.”*

So perhaps the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 is Jesus showing what he said he had come to do – to fulfil the law (given to Moses) and the prophets (like Elisha). He is demonstrating that the power of God is upon him and that what He is doing is in keeping with what God has done before. In other words, there is a message in this miracle. As with everything in the NT there is a continuity – the new testament is a fulfilment of the OT.

At one level the miracle shows that God does indeed care about giving his people daily bread. God provides because he has compassion on his people. But the message of the miracle goes deeper than that. After all – He could have just told the people to go home! (I was thinking how much easier it would have been for him if he had sent them home – after all do you remember he had withdrawn to a solitary place, desperately sad about John but the crowd had followed him. You know that sense of getting home exhausted or upset and the doorbell rings? And you wonder whether to hide under the bed or open the door with a smile!?)

The Roman emperors were notorious for giving the people bread and circuses. This was the means by which they kept control of the masses in Rome and rallied them to their cause. If the crowds were fed and entertained this was usually enough to satisfy them. But Jesus did not want a following of people who just wanted bread and circuses. He did more than dole out food and create spectacles to capture people’s attention. He wanted his miracles to point to the fact that the Kingdom of God was setting loose in the world. He wanted people to understand that a whole new reality had come into their midst. And that is what Jesus is pointing to when he feeds the 5000.

Now, what did the disciples make of this? In Luke’s account they had been out on the road for what is estimated to be about 9 months –sent out two by two by Jesus with authority. We read *“they preached that people should repent, they drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them.”*

The apostles had great things to report about God’s Kingdom invading earth – but Jesus was grieving – John the Baptist had been beheaded and Jesus had lost a friend and beloved cousin. – Isn’t that so often our experience – a great triumph in ministry and at the same time an inexplicable and terrible thing. How do we make sense of this? – Or can we live holding our questions and remaining faithful to our call. This is, I believe, a key question for us at the moment as a church.

This instruction from Jesus to “give them something to eat” was hard for even the closest to Jesus to get their heads around. It caught them off guard and even the disciples who had performed miracles in the name of Jesus for the last 9 months were still locked into an old way of thinking – a way of thinking that still couldn’t see the unlimited possibilities that God’s kingdom opens up. They were still saying “we couldn’t possibly do that. The disciples do a quick head count and estimate it would take 8 months wages to pay for a single meal for a crowd this size. They say “Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat? Do you really expect us to do that?” Convinced by their inadequacy the disciples believe that is the end of the story. But much to their surprise Jesus refuses to give up. The disciples had been out seeing the signs of the kingdom of God. Yet, they didn’t get it – even though they had seen at first hand they still didn’t get it - the abundant generosity of God.

Don’t you think that is odd?? I wonder whether it was easier for them to believe in healings and freedom from demons because perhaps they can be explained psychosomatically. A miracle that multiplied bread and fish is extraordinarily concrete and unarguable. They started listening to the reasons in their head why there was no way they could do it. But Jesus looked at them and said “You already possess everything you need to do this.” The potential was already there for them to accomplish what Jesus was asking them to do. They already had everything they needed to do the job. **We too need to adjust the way we think to the abundance of God’s provision. We need to learn what we have so that we can position ourselves better to give.**

Remember Jesus did not do this miracle as God – he did it as a man and he modelled it for us. He put it on display for us. He told the disciples they had the power to do it too.

How true is this also of our situations – individually, in our families and corporately. In the things we are battling with at the moment should we be praying? YES. But should we also be stepping out in obedience knowing that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to us because of Jesus? We must take care that our praying is not a reason for not doing things. We pray and ask God to be with us - NO – Don’t do that – The promise in the Bible “I will be with you Always, even to the end of time.” So don’t pray for God to be with you – pray and thank Him for his promise to “never leave you or forsake you!”. And our praying should be about praying into a life style, so that when challenges come we can demonstrate the Kingdom of God. Jesus did not Ask God to make the food go further. Instead he simply thanked his father for the food.

Unless we too learn to be thankful to God for what we DO have, we will say “what are 5 loaves and 2 fishes among so many people?” In a world of so much need, in the places in our lives so much in need of love and grace, how can something as little as this make a difference at all? I confess, I try and work it out. 5 loaves and 2 fishes – not enough – how can we make it go round, how can we find more money to buy more food, let’s go to the shops which will take half a day and cart a load of food back and miss Jesus teaching and wear ourselves out but help people! Yet we all know in our heads that God’s economy is not our economy. The important thing is not whether we have enough bread, but whether we have enough faith. If we do not turn our eyes to the father God that Jesus also turned his eyes to, we won’t be able to avoid finishing with powerless statements like “This won’t be enough.” And how many situations like that will there be!

Nothing will happen without the power of God of course. By their own efforts it really would be a futile exercise. But the power of God could do wonders – it could transform.

George Müller 1800s Christian evangelist who started an orphanage in 1836 and then developed more across the country. The children are dressed and ready for school. But there is no food for them to eat," the housemother of the orphanage informed George Mueller. George asked her to take

the 300 children into the dining room and have them sit at the tables. He thanked God for the food and waited. George knew God would provide food for the children as he always did. Within minutes, a baker knocked on the door. "Mr. Mueller," he said, "last night I could not sleep. Somehow I knew that you would need bread this morning. I got up and baked three batches for you. I will bring it in." Soon, there was another knock at the door. It was the milkman. His cart had broken down in front of the orphanage. The milk would spoil by the time the wheel was fixed. He asked George if he could use some free milk. George smiled as the milkman brought in ten large cans of milk. It was just enough for the 300 thirsty children.

You know that verse in Romans where Paul tells us to "be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Perhaps our minds are renewed when we have the faith to believe the impossible! Perhaps we need to remember over again and remind each other of God's perception of what we call reality and repent.

The Kingdom of God seems to work by this multiple effect doesn't it. It takes what little we already have as God's people and multiplies it to an amazing degree. (Remember in the OT God asked Moses what was in his hand and then transformed it using what had been merely a shepherd's staff and using it to part the sea. And Elisha when a woman needed financial help and she only had a little oil she borrowed jars to pour the oil and multiplied it until they were full.) In Biblical tradition God transforms ordinary things. We may feel inadequate to the calling God has given us – and undoubtedly we are. But God can use what we place in his hands. By his power he can take it and turn it into something truly amazing.

Philip Yancey writes about a conversation he had with an elderly missionary who had spent his early career in China. His missionary work had been brought to an end when the Communists took over and expelled all the missionaries. The communist government did all that it could to destroy the church. Pastors were imprisoned. House churches were outlawed. Parents were forbidden to teach their children about the bible. All the missionaries who had worked so hard could do nothing but wring their hands and pray. They feared that without them the church in China could not survive. For forty years they had no clear idea of what had become of the work they had done. Then in the late 1980s China started to open up. Philip Yancey asked the elderly missionary what had happened in the intervening 40 years. He replied "Conservatively I would estimate that there were 750,000 Christians when we left China. And now? The figure would be around 35million. The exiled missionaries had felt powerless to do anything but the power of God had been at work the whole time, taking what they had begun and multiplying it many times over.

As we give the smallness of what we have to God he will turn them into expressions of his love. He will use them to announce that his kingdom is near. He will make them into bread from heaven and hungry hearts will be fed. We must realise what we have in God. That the Kingdom of Heaven has been entrusted to us. These stories are our stories – they are our inheritance as children of God.

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