

Feeding of the Five thousand

Matthew 14:13-21

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INTRO

As children in Sunday School, many of us have often heard the story of how Jesus provided food for over 5000 people. Our teachers focused often on the little boy who actually owned the 5 loaves and the 2 fishes; more than once I have heard the story told as seen through the eyes of that boy. What would we have done if we were him...? Would we have given our food to Jesus?

The Sunday School stories of Jesus often had a certain predictability. There is a problem, then comes the Lord Jesus, and because He loves all people and He can do miracles, the problems are solved.

As adults we are also able to look at some different other layers in the story, because it contains rich significance.

COMPASSION

Jesus had compassion with the people, we heard, and that is not a small thing. He had compassion with the thousands of people that had followed Him, even though He himself was in difficult circumstances, and wanted to be alone.

Jesus was staying in Capernaum, his hometown on the northwestern tip of the lake of Galilee. He had gone by boat to the eastside of the lake, a few kilometers away, to be by himself.

Around Capernaum, being alone was problematic. Galilee was an area of about 300 square kilometers, and according to the Jewish historian Josephus it was densely populated with 204 villages.

But on the other side of the lake, there were some quiet places. It is likely that Jesus and his disciples went to the little city called Bet-saida Julias; just a kilometer or so south of that is a quiet plane with a hill slowly rising up behind it.

Why did our Lord want to be alone? Matthew explains that Jesus had just found out that He was now appearing on the radar screen of Herod Antipas, the one who had just recently murdered John the Baptist. The murder of John, Jesus' cousin, had deeply grieved Jesus, and knowing that Herod was now also interested in Him, made Jesus want to be alone for a while.

Matthew writes that Herod had heard of the miracles Jesus was doing, and that Herod had this frightening idea that Jesus was actually John the Baptist risen from the dead.

Interesting is that Herod did not doubt the veracity of the miracle-stories he heard. Those could not be denied; the question was: how to explain them.

Just before Jesus set off in the fishing boat to Betsaida Julias, He had also had some tensions in Capernaum. The religious leaders and many others, even some of his family took offense at Him.

‘Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?’, was what they asked. Like Herod, they recognized His miracles, but it did not fit in their worldview.

So our Lord withdrew to a solitary place, to be alone with his disciples, but above all, alone with God. Jesus regularly withdrew from the business and tensions of life for some time of quiet prayer.

But when people in Capernaum and the villages on the shores of the lake realized that

Jesus was crossing the water, many followed him on foot, and when He landed, they were there. Thousands and thousands. Stinking, sweaty, loud, poor, sick people.

When I have headaches because in my work things do not go as desired, or I have money problems, or family-issues, when I do not feel too well, I also have a desire to be by myself and not be disturbed – introverted as I am. When people then invade my private space I can respond so irritated and uncharitable...

We often do not respond with the compassion of Jesus. The Greek word for compassion means deep inner pain because of the situation of someone else, just as the English word compassion literally means: to participate in the suffering of someone else. Compassion's focus is on the problems of the other.

When Jesus saw the people, He did not focus on his own needs, but He felt their pain. Many of them actually suffered physically –

that is precisely why they had followed Him – many needed healing.

POWER

So Jesus healed their sick, is what Matthew wrote. Matthew was there, with the other disciples, and with the thousands, and Matthew and all people saw it with their own eyes.

Friends, if we do not take these words of Matthew about miracles seriously, then not much of his Gospel is left. Then not much of Jesus is left. The whole New Testament underlines that He, the Son of God, is able by the word of His mouth, to miraculously heal anyone.

The people that met the Lord Jesus never doubted this. Not the people in his hometown, not his family, not even his enemies.

In his very beautiful book called *Jesus of Nazareth*, pope Benedict XVI of Rome, portrays the Jesus of the Gospels as the real his-

torical Jesus in the strict sense of the word.
He writes:

I am convinced that this figure is much more logical and historically speaking, much more intelligible than the reconstructions we have been presented with in the last decades. I believe that this Jesus, the Jesus of the Gospels, is a historically plausible and convincing figure. (p. xxii)

It is unhistorical to construct a Jesus and a Christian faith that cuts out everything from the Biblical stories that we find difficult to believe, just because we have been born in the 20th century.

We all have our own worldviews, and we try to fit all things into that box. And if what Jesus does or says does not fit in that box, we dumb Jesus and the early church down. Jesus did miracles? He was the Son of God? How

odd that the early church believed this... How stupid do we think they were in those days?

In our modern time, many have dismissed the idea that God can intervene in history. If He cannot intervene in our history, including with miraculous events, then on what basis do we think that He can play any role in our life at all?

A compassionate Jesus, a loving God, it means nothing if that Jesus is not able to implement his compassion with power in our life. The best we are left with is a distant God and some pious philosophical dreams.

Why then pray for those who are sick in our congregation? Why pray for our families? Why pray for our children, our work, if God is not willing and able to intervene?

When the Lord Jesus saw the miserable crowds gathering around him, instead of sending them away, he healed all who were sick.

WE ARE CALLED

And then the sun began to set. I think we can understand the worries of the disciples, when it became late. They suggested to Jesus to send the masses away to their homes, so that they could eat. I believe the disciples shared the same compassion with the people as Jesus had, when they made this suggestion.

Then Matthew describes the miracle of the feeding of 5000 people with only 5 loaves and 2 fishes. The 5 pieces of bread were like our local *'aish baladi*, the flat pieces of Egyptian bread, not unlike what we use with Holy Communion.

Mathew had been a tax collector so he was not totally bad with figures. He could figure it out: this was another magnificent miracle. You cannot feed 5000 people with 5 pieces of bread and 2 fishes...

But if Jesus could heal all people by his powerful word, would it not have been much easier for Him to ensure that people actually would not feel hungry at all? One word only would have been enough: 'Be not hungry, feel full!' Why would He not have done this?

Maybe the answer is this: In the morning, Jesus showed his immense powers by healing the sick, in the evening He told his disciples: Now it is your turn to be involved, you feed the masses! Jesus put the responsibility for implementing his compassion squarely on the shoulders of those who follow him.

It is as if Jesus is preparing his disciples for the time that He would be no longer on earth, and they had to do His work on earth.

Jesus did send his followers, and that includes us, into the world to be a healing presence, to feed the poor, to teach about His Kingdom, to stand by people in their suffering.

If He wants something done today, if he wants a child taught or a person helped, He has to get someone to do it. He needs people through whom he can act and speak. He needs men and women to whom he can give his bread, so that they can give that to others.

The Church and its members are the instrument of the Lord Christ to do His healing work in this world. 'You give them something to eat', He tells us today.

This is why the Church has always been in the forefront of building schools, and hospitals, why churches have historically been so interested in helping the poor. A little study of the beginnings of hospitals and schools here in Egypt proves this point.

GOSPEL SIGNIFICANCE

But I do not want to secularize this command of Christ to us. He did not tell his followers to become development workers – even

though that is incredibly important, and even though we must, as a Church, engage in all these things, where we can.

If we conclude that we must all become development workers, and that this is the extent of God's plan for us and the world, we miss the significance of the story.

The feeding of the 5000 was a pointer actually. Without undermining the historical value of the event, it is also proper to look at the deeper symbolism of the event.

The readers of the Gospel that Matthew wrote were immediately aware of the significance of the story, because Matthew began in a very strange manner. He described that Jesus withdrew on the eastside of the lake to a solitary place. The Greek actually speaks of a place that was *ereemos*. Literally: a desert. But the eastside of the lake was not *ereemos*, a desert. It was fruitful. Yes, Jesus chose a

relatively quiet place, but it was lush and green.

So those who heard the story thought: why does Matthew call it a desert... and when he then told of Jesus miraculously feeding the people, it was fully clear to Matthew's Jewish readers: Jesus was being compared here with Moses, who gave the Israelites miraculous food in the desert.

But Jesus was even greater than Moses, as the food, the bread that He offers, is of a totally different nature.

The apostle John, in his Gospel, spells this out. He describes that on the day after the event, when Jesus was back in Capernaum, He blamed the people for just having enjoyed the material miracle, the physical food He gave to them.

But this physical food was just a sign of something much more important. Not the

miracle, but the one doing the miracle is of highest importance. Jesus said:

I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.
(John 6:48-51)

This immediately places the feeding of the 5000 in what we may call a 'Eucharistic light'. *The feeding of the 5000 signified that Jesus Himself is the one who can still our hunger for reality and for eternal life.*

That is the deep and true extent of his compassion. He suffered so deeply with the people, with their brokenness, sinfulness, and separation from God, that He himself died for

the sake of all, as we celebrate in Holy Communion.

In this respect, the description of what Jesus exactly did for multiplying the bread is also significant. Listen to what Matthew writes:

Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people.

These words we recognize also from the last supper of our Lord, in the night when he was betrayed. And these are the same words we use when we celebrate Holy Communion.

Our Egyptian Church father Kyrollos, who became bishop of Alexandria on 17 October 412, commented on this same prayer of Jesus before he distributed the food to the 5000. He underlines the Eucharistic importance of the story:

[Jesus] did this so that we might learn that when we are in charge of the table and are preparing to break the loaves, we ought to bring them to God with hands upraised and bring down upon them the blessing from above; [Jesus] became for us the beginning, and pattern and way.

Holy Communion is where we celebrate the greatest miracle of Jesus – his death and resurrection for us. It is the place where he continues to feed us, and where He gives us strength for doing our daily work as His hands in this world.

He feeds us, he nourishes us, and he makes us strong to go into the world another week, for being a blessing to the sick, to the poor, to the people waiting for Good News.

Just like Jesus pointed to himself and his sacrifice by feeding the hungry, so our work of compassion must be that pointer to the grace

of God through Jesus Christ. We must be careful not to secularize and de-miraculize [is this a word?] our faith and our life of every day.

It is rather easy to be very orthodox about Jesus' miracles, and recognize that He did amazing things, but at the same time practically relegate the stories of miracles of Jesus to a distant, almost mythical past.

The reality is: if Jesus did real miracles, and if He is indeed the Son of God, then we have every reason to pray today, believing that He will answer our prayers. Otherwise, we are just playing religious games here.

And it is exactly at Holy Communion that this divine Christ is very near. He is really present in our midst, and He invites us – even now – to share our needs with Him.

We come with empty hands, and we need Him to fill our hands. His desire is to do this,

to fill us with Himself, so that our hunger is stilled, and so that we as a Church and as individuals, can offer the healing of Jesus Christ, the bread of life, to all.