

Sermon on Sunday 28 July 2024

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

(Gospel: John 6 1-14)

Feeding of the five thousand



Numbers matter in the Bible.

In our first reading, Elisha the prophet feeds 100 famished disciples with just 20 loaves of bread, and there's some left over when they're all full. Jesus feeds 5,000 hungry followers with just five loaves of bread. The leftovers fill 12 baskets.

Do the maths. The crowd in the mountains beyond Lake Galilee did the maths. 'This is indeed the new Prophet', this is the big one, the one we've been waiting for.

It is easy to read this story as a kind of enacted parable, a teaching aid that reveals Jesus' status and power in a way that makes sense to his scripturally literate audience.

But one little throwaway detail gives the story colour and humanity. The feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle story that appears in all four Gospels, but John brings in another number. One. He alone includes that brief, touching detail of ONE boy with the five loaves and two small fish.

This morning, let's look again at the story, imagined through that boy's eyes:

'What will I say to mum when I get home? She'll be worried sick. I promised I'd be home by nightfall this time, we wouldn't go too far, we'd leave if it went on late. But we kept going, wherever Jesus led us, right up into the hills beyond the lake.

'Yes, it got later than we thought, but nobody wanted to go home – not as long as Jesus was talking. But maybe mum just knew that I wouldn't be home for supper after all. She spent all morning baking and gave me five loaves to take with me. Dad doesn't like me going off to these revival meetings. He sees Jesus as a troublemaker. But I think mum understands that I'm looking for something more than the elders at the synagogue have to offer, even if I have to walk half the length of the country to find it. So, yes, we got hungry. I know, "Man shall not live by bread alone"... but nor can you get by all day on words, even Jesus' words.

'The daft thing was, I was terribly hungry, I had my mum's food hidden away in my bag, but didn't dare get it out and tuck in. So many hungry people around me – I'd get mugged. Well, maybe not, but I'd have to share it round, wouldn't I. Especially after all Jesus had been saying to us about loving our neighbours and that. But mum baked this specially for me. Better save it for the way home, I thought, when I'm on my own.

'But then Jesus went quiet, and I heard his disciples talking to each other about food – where were they going to get food for all these people, out here at this time of day? Jesus' disciples are a great crew, but they are not Event Planners. And then I saw him, Jesus, looking straight at me, with that calm, penetrating gaze. I know exactly what he wanted, and I couldn't help it, I just opened my bag and gave him mum's bread, and the fish. It was dumb really, pointless, a waste – now I'd go hungry, but what use would five rolls be to the huge crowd. And Jesus took mum's loaves and said the thanksgiving over them like he was a king saying the grace before a royal banquet.

'But then, suddenly, there was a banquet going on. All round me people were sitting in groups and eating – bread and fish. This is like manna, some were saying – bread from Heaven. He's like Moses, he's the new lawgiver. He's like David, others were saying – this is the coronation feast of the new king. He's like Elisha, feeding his followers, but 50 times better [I told you they did the maths]. Well, all that stuff goes over my head, I'm only a lad. But I knew Jesus had done something amazing.

'And the really amazing thing was this. With just a gaze, he'd changed me. Changed me from a lad who likes to keep what he has for himself, to a lad who is ready to give. That's Jesus - a man who can change our hearts. When you have power like that, amazing things will happen.'

In a few moments time, before the Eucharistic prayer, our bread and wine – no fish, I'm afraid - will be carried forward to the communion table and be offered to God, to be shared amongst his followers. It often gets a bit lost in all the business of the peace and the offertory hymn, but at that moment of our worship, I invite you to think back to the young lad in John's gospel. Bringing our small gifts to Jesus, trusting that in his hands, they can bring great blessings on us all.

I have belonged to a congregation where the communion bread is not a stylised wafer, but a loaf of bread freshly baked by one of the congregation, to be torn and shared piece by piece around the communion table. A gift of love and labour from the hearth and home of a fellow worshipper for the wellbeing of all. Those five loaves didn't just happen, there was care and love and kindness behind them – and some hard work. God values that kind of gift.

5,000 – that's a big number for outdoor catering. But we live in an age of big numbers – and at a time when bad news particularly has a lot of zeros on the end. Average household debt in tens of thousands, unemployment and sickness absence in millions, global CO2 emissions in billions of tons; 820 million people on our planet living permanently with malnutrition.

With all the stress and need and misery that each stark figure represents, it is very tempting to tuck our little bag of bread and fish away in our cloaks and hang on to what we've got, maybe not so much because we're selfish, but because anything we can do seems to be just a drop in a bucket – and a bottomless bucket at that.

But we forget the God who can change hearts. And that is where just one number matters. One. That's you, that's me. Is he gazing at you? What does he want you to bring to him, and what might he do with it?

Our God has the power to change people's hearts. Expect amazing things to happen.