

The Mega Picnic

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 6th August 2023 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Psalm 145:8-9,15-22; Matthew 14:13-21

Introduction: what kind of miracle?

The story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand must be one of the best known stories in the Gospels. Jesus uses 5 loaves of bread and two fish to feed five thousand people – or as Matthew's version has it, five thousand men plus women and children¹. An amazing miracle, one which points to who Jesus is, the Son of God.

Some modern interpreters have explained the miracle in more practical terms – Jesus' act of sharing what little food he and his disciples have encourages the people in the crowd who've brought their own food to share it with others. That may have happened, of course, and if this were Jesus' only miracle then we could perhaps get away with this neat way of avoiding belief in the supernatural. But there's too much evidence of Jesus working other miracles for us to think we can just explain this one away.

The meaning of the story

Anyway, there's much more to this story than just a demonstration of Jesus' miraculous powers. If we use our imagination a little, we may notice some other key messages about Jesus, about the disciples, and about what following

¹ Matthew 14:21

Jesus means for us. I'm indebted to Tom Wright's book *Matthew for Everyone*² for the insights he gives into this passage.

This story is one of the few that come in all four Gospels. Let's listen afresh to the story as Matthew tells it, and see what we might notice.

Our passage begins

¹³ Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.

What has Jesus just heard? In both Matthew's and Mark's Gospels, the preceding verses are the account of how John the Baptist was executed by Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee and Perea, a territory on the west of the Jordan river. Matthew implies that Jesus, saddened by the news of John's death, is seeking a deserted place to grieve and take stock. We all need time and space sometimes to come to terms with a loss, a disappointment or a setback. But no sooner has Jesus reached this deserted place with his disciples than a crowd of needy people descend on him, wanting him to heal their sick.

Jesus responds to need

How would we respond? This was what Jesus did:

¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick.

Jesus puts the needs of others before his own. And after a while the disciples, seeing this, speak to Jesus about the

² Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone. Part 1* (London: SPCK 2002)

people's need for food. Their own stomachs may have also helped their awareness of the need for a meal:

¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.'

Jesus sees this as an opportunity to teach his disciples a lesson:

¹⁶ Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' ¹⁷ They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.'

Too little resource?

Nowadays, if we listen to or read the news, we are aware of a huge amount of need in the world. Many people in poorer countries have a daily struggle to survive, made worse by natural disasters, inequality and injustice. Many in our own nation, and in our own community, depend on foodbanks. And there are many other kinds of suffering around us, not just food and financial insecurity. The scale of the problems of the world seems overwhelming and our resources so inadequate to meet the needs. But just as Jesus challenged his disciples not to shrug their shoulders and opt out, so he challenges us today. And what Jesus said to the twelve about their two fish and five loaves he also says to us:

¹⁸ And he said, 'Bring them here to me.'

Only Matthew's version has these words, and they are so helpful to us as we think about what God is saying to us through this story.

The disciples bring what they have to Jesus, and he blesses it, and then gives it to them to distribute to the crowd. And as they do so, needs are met, in a more wonderful way than they could possibly have imagined.

The multiplier effect

Now your ten, fifty or two hundred pounds that you give to, let's say, Tearfund to help the hungry in Ethiopia may not seem much compared to the need, but the important thing is that we are willing to give it, asking for Jesus' blessing on our gift and letting God take it and do with it what he wants. In fact, money spent on development work, rather than crisis response, does multiply: a goat bought for a poor family will enable them to sell the milk and pay for school uniform for their children. The goat may produce young which can then be sold, enabling another child to go to school, or a sick relative to get medicine.

Closer to home, an hour a week spent visiting a lonely or depressed person could result in them not only feeling better and more confident, but beginning in their turn to reach out to others. Our giving nearly always has a multiplier effect.

What is important is our attitude to our resources. Our time, talents and money are given to us by God to use in the service of his Kingdom. Jesus says that instead of being inward-looking and worrying whether we will have enough to eat, clothes to wear or other material possessions which

we think are essential, we should seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness and God will provide for our needs³.

God's abundance

The punch-line of the story comes in what Matthew tells us about the left-overs:

²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.

It isn't just that everyone had enough to eat: each of the twelve disciples collected a basketful of left-overs. God provides in abundance, if we will only trust him and let him use us and what we may consider to be our meagre resources to bring about blessing for the world.

So this story isn't just about the supernatural power of Jesus, revealed in the feeding of more than five thousand people. It's a message about being open to God's miraculous power working through us and the resources we have, however limited they may seem. The miracle *begins* when we start to look at needs and resources God's way, rather than taking a zero-sum approach. But it doesn't *end* there. There's no end to what God can do through those who have an attitude of faith and obedience.

³ Matthew 6:31-33