

The Unfathomable and Unthinkable: Sermon St Matthew 18 July 2021
Mark 6, Feeding of the 5000, Ephesians 2:11-end

David Lucas

Prayer:

Lord God, thank you. Thank you for the Gospel reading this morning. Thank you for your compassion and radical unfathomable love towards us and all of your people. I pray Lord that you would speak to us today; open our hearts, that they might burn to know you more, that we would know your compassion for ourselves and to thus share that compassion with others. I pray this in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Intro:

The feeding of the 5000 is such an iconic story in the life of Jesus, all four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, tell this story, each from a slightly different angle, and as we shall see over the next weeks, it is incredibly important to our understanding of who Jesus is.

Review:

Well, here we are in Mark's Gospel, and as always, context is key. Two weeks ago, you may remember, our readings told of Jesus Sending out His disciples in twos to go out into the world, preaching and teaching of God's kingdom. They were to bring no provisions with them, and like Israel's lesson in the wilderness, after their exodus from Egypt, the disciples were to learn to be entirely reliant upon God and his power in every way. They needed to remember, to understand, that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

And you also may remember our readings from **last** week, the story Lissa had thought was unfortunate as the reading for the week she was to introduce her new curate: the horrible, and stupid, story of Herod beheading John the Baptist so that he wouldn't lose face in front of his dinner guests.

Context: Matthew emphasises the context being the death of John the Baptist, Luke emphasises the context being the sending out of the 12 disciples.

Well, in our Gospel readings today from Mark, both of these stories come home to roost; we need to have both of these stories in the back of our minds as we come to this feeding of the 5000.

Story:

As Laurence has just read for us, today's Gospel reading begins with the apostles gathering around Jesus. **Verse 30** They have just returned from their missionary journey, and are telling him about all of the incredible things they had been able to do, just like Jesus had done, and about how they taught about the Kingdom of heaven, just like Jesus had taught. You can imagine the scene. The amazement of the disciples, the excitement of telling their stories, and of hearing similar stories from the others. I can imagine Jesus' face in that moment, his expression at their enthusiasm. But because so many others are around, Jesus takes them away to a deserted place so that they can rest.

Point 1: And here is the first point I would like for us to take away from this story. Here we see Jesus taking care of His disciples, taking them away so that they can rest, for quiet, for an opportunity to pray. We see this again and again of Jesus's life in the Gospels; he ministers from this place of rest, ministers from this place of time given to intimacy with His father. He is always going off to the wilderness, or up a mountain for this intimate time meeting with His father.

The disciples recognise this, see that it is from this place of prayer that Jesus begins and ends all of his good works and teaching, and it is this recognition that leads the disciple to ask Jesus to teach them how to pray. This way of intimacy with the Father is meant to be an example to his disciples, and for all of us, here, 2000 years later. It is from this place, in the presence of God, that we are thus enabled to live and work to His praise and Glory. The creature in right relationship before his or her creator. And it is for this purpose that Jesus takes his disciples away for rest and for prayer.

But what happens? The crowds follow them, or go on ahead to the wilderness where Jesus was taking His disciples. And this is where the context from last week's story comes in. Who was John the Baptist to the common Israelite people at the time? They recognised that he was a prophet, which meant that God was no longer silent. Which meant that God was looking again to His people. Which implied that possibility that God was going to free them. They had been suffering under the rule of the Romans for so long, and the Greeks before them, and the Persians, and Babylonians and Assyrians before them. Did God now send His prophet as an indication that the time was near that the awaited messiah would rise up and lead the people to freedom from oppression? But then this John the Baptist was murdered for the stupidest, most ridiculous of reasons and by the supposed king of Israel, of all people. So the people turned their hopes to the one John the Baptist himself had pointed to. Jesus

Verse 34: As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things

Point 2: He saw... a great crowd. He had compassion for them. They were like sheep without a shepherd. This of course is echoed at the end of our Gospel reading as well: **Verse 56 “And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed”**. Here is what I think is our second takeaway from today’s readings. See here, in Jesus, in the look in his eyes, in His very being, pure Holy divine, love. He loved the people, He had compassion on them. Just as He loves us; and has compassion on us. On me. On you. On our neighbour. His love has the power to change. It heals. It lifts up. It moves us to share and declare that love. And this love is never ending. God Himself loves us my friends, my family.

Point 3: And this leads right into my third and final point: This love expresses itself in ways that anything comparable from earth is only a shadow or sketch to what is God’s radical divine love. And it is the expression of this radical divine love that we are all invited to participate in.

Jesus sees and meets the people, has compassion upon them, teaches and heals them. And in the midst of their grief and anger about the loss of John the Baptist, and now their hunger as well (being late in the day), Jesus does the unimaginable. **Verses 39 and 40:** He has them sit in groups of Hundreds and Fifties on the green grass. Here in the wilderness, he feeds them all.

Verse 44 tells us that those who had eaten numbered 5000 men. Why does the bible only indicate men? Surely there would have been women and children present. Is it that the Bible is only an artifact from a less civilised, male centric/ chauvinist society? I think if we were to jump to that conclusion we would miss the point. Notice how in the feeding of the 4000 two chapters later, Mark doesn’t indicate that men only ate, but men and women and children. Notice as well that there are no groups of hundreds and fifties mentioned.

Our reading today numbers 5000 men, in groups of 100s and 50s because we are meant to recognise these numbers as military groupings. Jesus knows the frustration of the people. They are looking for the one promised who would free them from tyranny and establish the promised kingdom of God. The death of John the Baptist is the spark that could ignite a revolution. The people are looking for someone that they could march behind, they were looking to see if Jesus was the one who would lead them.

Jesus knows all of this, and he intentionally separates them into these groupings. Imagine their anticipation, their excitement in the moment. It's happening. This is it. This is the beginning.

Jesus meets them exactly where they are, just as he meets us where we are. He enters into our story just as He enters into theirs. And the moment they thought He was participating, He subverted their expectations, He changes it. His expression of radical divine love does the unimaginable: **Verse 41: Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people.**

In an act intentionally reminiscent of God's provision for Israel in the wilderness, here in this wilderness Jesus performs this bread miracle.

John's Gospel indicates that this connection wasn't lost on the people. They saw the significance of this act and tried, then and there, to make Jesus king by force; Which is why Jesus and his disciples immediately leave afterwards. The people knew not what they were doing. But for us, who know the rest of the Gospel, we can see in these events the foreshadowing of the last supper and of Communion; and thus, of Jesus' death and resurrection, of His saving act of Love on behalf of the whole world. Jesus' kingdom is established through His sacrifice on the Cross.

The saviour the world needs is not a charismatic political or military figure. He does not participate in the pattern our fallen world has set, but he does enter it to redeem it.

His love is shaped so differently than anything we can imagine, yet we are invited to receive it, to participate in it, to share in it. This is the love that saves.

Conclusion:

My Brothers and Sisters, See then that **“We are no longer strangers and aliens, but we are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone”**. As members of God’s household we have a place at His table, **“In Him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom we also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.**