**Feeding the five thousand**  18/2/24dkm

Read: 2Kings 4:1-7, Mark 6:30-44

Text: Mark 6:30-44

Psalms: 92:1-6, 23, 145:13b-21, 117

The exodus from Egypt is a story every child in Israel was told. They were taught in stories, songs, and sacraments like the Passover. Part of this story was the miraculous way in which the Lord fed them in the desert. The Lord ‘rained bread from heaven’, which they called manna (Exod 16:4). Every morning, except on the Sabbath, the people gathered this small round substance, scattered like frost around their camp. Everyone got enough to satisfy their hunger. Greed was thwarted because any manna left overnight went rotten. It was a case of, ‘Give us today our daily bread’.

The Jews revered Moses as the one who gave them bread from heaven. They came to Jesus wanting a sign like this (John 6:30). This was just after Jesus had miraculously fed five thousand of their number in a deserted place near Bethsaida. In this miraculous sign Jesus showed that he is ‘the true bread from heaven’ (John 6:32). Jesus satisfies every hungry soul. Do you have a hungry soul? Are you hungry for the truth? Are you hungry for life, eternal life?

The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand is one of the best known stories in the Bible. In fact, it is the only miracle, apart from the resurrection, that is recorded in all four gospels. All four accounts agree, although Mark and John give more detail than the others. This event occurred after the twelve returned from the mission Jesus sent them on (6:7, 30). They reported back to Jesus, telling him all that they had done and taught (6:30). We had such a debriefing session after returning from the mission field; the session was quite intense but important and helpful in the longer term. Ministers should probably be offered such sessions from time to time, or when completing a ministry! Jesus urged them to come aside to a quiet place and rest for a while (6:30, 31). Is this advice for missionaries as well as ministers- even if they do have time to eat?

If all the apostolic writers found this event in the ministry of Jesus interesting and important, we should feel the same. So let us come apart and meditate on this passage for a while. We will do so under four headings: compassion of Jesus, commission to disciples, Christ’s mighty work.

**1. Compassion of Jesus**

Jesus set out from Capernaum with the apostles to go to a deserted place. He wanted some time out with the Twelve. Taking a boat, he crossed to the northeast shore of the lake, to a deserted place not far from Bethsaida. Just getting into the boat would have revived the apostles; do you feel a sense of relief and rest when, after all the business of bags, tickets, and visas, you slump into your seat on the plane?

The people watched as Jesus set off with the apostles across the Lake of Galilee, which is not a huge lake. They guessed where they were headed and set off after them, running around the edge of the Lake. Others joined as they went along (6:33). From Capernaum to Bethsaida is less than 10kms. As it turned, out they got to the spot where Jesus landed before he did. So much for a quiet time with his disciples!

How did Jesus respond to this unexpected intrusion? Did he get back into the boat and move further along? Did he tell the people to go away because he had other plans for the day? Did he respond like the pastor who said he could not attend a church function because it was his day off? As his ministry progressed, Jesus spent more time training his disciples and less time in public ministry; which is what we see here. But he was never too busy to minister to people’s needs. He never turned any needy person away.

Far from sending the people away, Jesus had compassion on them (6:34). They were ‘like sheep without a shepherd’ (6:34). As Jesus went through the villages of Israel he had compassion on the people because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Mat 9:36). Moses spoke of Israel in a similar way as he viewed the promise land (Numb 27:17). Israel needed a shepherd and now they had one.

Jesus began ministering to the people who followed him all the way around the lake. He began ‘teaching them many things’ (6:34); Matthew says that he healed the sick (Mat 14:14), while Luke has Jesus doing both, healing the sick and preaching the kingdom of God (Luke 9:11). Tired as he was, Jesus kept ministering to this crowd through the afternoon. Do you know that Jesus is never too busy or too tired to hear your prayers?

When we arrived home from an overseas mission field, we were taken aback at having to make appointments just to meet friends- sometimes weeks in advance. We were used to just dropping in, and whenever people dropped in they were offered a cup of tea. You can drop in on Jesus anytime, not for a cup of tea but for a listening ear and a compassionate heart. Indeed, if you are hungry Jesus can supply your tea or bread also, as he does here in this story. Have you learnt to come to Jesus with your needs and your problems? Have you learnt to, ‘Cast all your cares upon him, because he cares for you’ (1Peter 5:7)?

**2. Commission to his disciples**

The sun was sinking in the western sky but the people did not move. They were not thinking of their bellies as they eagerly listened to the words of the master teacher. But as it got late in the day, the twelve disciples started to worry about all these people being in this place. There were no shops or even homes nearby where the people could get food or lodging. They urged Jesus to send the people off into the villages to buy food for their dinner (6:35, 36). But Jesus answered them saying, ‘You give them something to eat’ (6:37). It is interesting that these disciples had recently been on mission, sent by Jesus to preach the kingdom of God, and with power to heal the sick and cast out demons. They had learnt a lot but were still learning from Jesus!

The disciples told Jesus that it would cost two hundred denarii to just to give everyone a basic meal (6:37). Their mission over, they were no longer thinking in terms of divine power but of worldly power. The disciples were thinking from a worldly perspective, thinking of money and physical resources. They failed to look to the One who rules over the physical resources. They could have answered Jesus saying, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of God; you are able to feed them’. They could have replied saying, ‘We cannot feed them without your help’- which is what actually happened. But instead they calculated that it would take almost eight months wages to buy a basic meal for all the people listening to Jesus. Imagine going to MacDonald’s and asking for five thousand kids meals- and the cost!

Jesus continued to involve his disciples in the challenge of feeding all these people, people on whom he had compassion. Did they share in his compassion? They were supposed to be having a time of rest, remember! John writes that Jesus was testing them, and that he knew what he would do (John 6:6). Jesus was teaching his disciples, even as he ministered to the crowd. Jesus asked them what they had in the way of bread (6:38). All they had was five barley loaves and two small fish, which came from a boy in the crowd (Matt 14:17, John 6:9). This boy’s lunch would not go very far towards feeding this crowd. Some liberal scholars try to tell us that when this boy shared his lunch everyone in the crowd suddenly decided to share their lunch also, and so all were fed. Is this what is written? When the people saw Jesus leaving Capernaum in a boat did they all race home to pack some lunch? Of course not. They ran after him.

What was Jesus teaching his disciples? He was teaching them that without Christ they could do nothing, but by abiding in Christ they would bear much fruit; they could do all things through Christ (John 15:5). He was teaching them that with Christ all things are possible (Phil 4:13). He was teaching them what it means to have faith, faith that works. Their faith would soon be tested again as they crossed the lake; and sadly found to be wanting (6:51). In asking them to feed the crowd, Jesus was not actually asking something impossible, just something impossible without Christ- there is a difference, a huge difference.

Have you ever faced an impossible situation in your life? What did you do? Thankfully, you are still here to answer the question, because some are not. Did you turn to the Lord in prayer? If not, then you now know this is what you must do. Have you have faced the greatest of all your problems, that of sin and death. We all face this problem at some time. Martin Luther faced this problem. He went to great efforts trying to deal with his sin. He spent hours praying to saints, and going to places to touch relics. Finally, he came to Jesus because he read in the Bible that Jesus has already done what is needed to take away his sin. He realised he could do nothing to save his soul from death because a blood sacrifice was required, the sacrifice of the perfect Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

**3. Christ’s mighty work**

The disciples were powerless to feed the crowd. They did not have sufficient food, or enough money to buy sufficient food. They stood helpless before Jesus, not yet understanding just who Jesus is. Jesus graciously took the little that they had, the five loaves and two fish, and commanded the people to sit down on the green grass in groups of hundreds and fifties (6:39, 40, cf. Exod 18:21). What was Jesus going to do? Would they see bread fall from heaven as their forefathers did in the desert? Would a mountain of bread suddenly appear before their eyes? The Pharisees wanted to see something spectacular before they would believe in Jesus. What Jesus was about to do was wonderful, just as wonderful as manna from heaven, and just as wonderful as the oil that filled the jars for Elisha (2Kings 4).

Jesus took the fives loaves and two fish, looked up to heaven, ‘blessed and broke the loaves’ (6:41). He also divided the two fish among his disciples. This reminds us of what he did at the last supper or his last Passover. John tells us it would soon be Passover (John 6:4). As Jesus broke the bread in the upper room, did the disciples recall this day in the desert? It is good for us to remember this day, not only the power of Jesus to multiply the loaves but his power to save us from sin and death: Jesus is the bread of life sent down from heaven (John 6:35).

Having given thanks and broken the bread, and divided the fish, Jesus set these ‘elements’ before his disciples, who from their small baskets fed the people. Either from the hands of Jesus, or in the baskets, or as they gave the food out, it kept on coming- we are not told the details. What we are told is that all the people ate and ate till their stomachs were full (6:42).

As if to anticipate scepticism and unbelief, we are told that the disciples gathered up twelve baskets full of left overs (6:43). Each of the disciples came back with his basket full. The Jews did not like wasting food. This is true, but more than this, everyone saw the abundance of food left over. They saw the five loaves and two fish as Jesus gave thanks, they all ate till they were full, and now they saw twelve full baskets left over. I know school kids often leave some of their lunch, but it is harder to believe that all these people brought their lunch with them, and then had so much left over, than it is to believe what is written.

The people knew what Jesus had done, although they failed to see beyond the fact that he gave them lots of bread for their belly. John tells us that the next day the people found Jesus back in Capernaum and were looking for more stomach-food. Jesus told them that this feeding of the five thousand was a sign, a sign that he was the bread of life sent down from heaven. Jesus is the bread that satisfies hungry souls, souls burdened by sin and death. He is the bread that gives true life, eternal life.