

John 6 v1 - 21    2Kings 4 v42 -44    Psalm 145

Feeding the Multitude written by Sarah Ashton

May my feet walk in your way Lord, may my hands do your work Lord, may my mind think of you Lord, may my heart be filled with your Love Lord and may my mouth speak your words Lord. Amen

This morning's sermon is the filling from John White's sandwich last week when he spoke about spending time with Jesus as a way to replenish ourselves to be able to give to others. Food is another way to replenish ourselves and one that is rather important to me. I enjoy cooking and there is nothing better than sitting down to a leisurely meal with friends and family. Like many people during the last 15 months, I have looked for different recipes and successfully prepared some of them (although I often change an ingredient or two to suit what I have or like). In the first lockdown I tried to bring a little cheer into the lives of those I was helping and for 15 weeks I baked something different each week for sharing. I enjoy cooking with my granddaughters and a simple recipe that we have been experimenting with is for flat breads made with flour and natural yoghurt. It is a "get your hands in there and make it" recipe and once you have the rounds of floppy dough you can cook them simply or be adventurous and turn them into pizzas with a range of toppings: fun and nutritious. Food puts a smile on people's faces, some foods bring comfort, others evoke memories but we all need a certain amount of food to keep our bodies functioning efficiently.

The story in today's Gospel is about feeding a large group of people so that they are fully satisfied, with just the meagre ingredients that are readily available to them. The account starts with Jesus trying to move away from the crowds, but they follow as they have seen him healing the sick. On seeing the crowd Jesus asks Philip where they could buy bread. It is likely that He asked Philip as he was local to the area, but Philip seeing the size of the crowd fears they would not have the money to buy so much bread even if a baker had the stock. The crowd is estimated to be 5000 and this would just be the men as they didn't count the women and children (as stated in Matthew 14v21). Andrew says that there is a young boy who has his lunch of five small barley loaves and two small fish. Barley loaves were the food of the poor. Jesus doesn't panic at this. He asks the crowd to sit down and gives thanks over the loaves and the fish and shares them out amongst all the people.

There are Old Testament accounts of similar events such as our reading from 2 Kings where a man has brought 20 barley loaves for just 100 men and fears there is not enough but Elisha, God's prophet, says 'The Lord says they will eat and have some left over'. They do eat and have leftovers; it happens exactly as prophesied. Before Elisha, Elijah was fed by the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17). She had little left in her flour and oil jars, but by agreeing to feed Elijah the supply of oil and flour remained miraculously plentiful and no one went hungry. Earlier than that, in Exodus 16, the Israelites are moaning to Moses that they are hungry in the wilderness and would have been better off staying in Egypt as they would have had some food. God's response is to rain down manna from heaven, as dew on the grass in the mornings for them to eat and send flocks of quail in the evenings. There is precedent for Jesus being able to feed many from very little and amazingly Jesus has 12 baskets of leftover bread after every one has eaten.

So what do learn from this account? Firstly, this is the one miracle of Jesus (apart from the resurrection) that is recorded in all four Gospels. It shows Jesus acting with compassion and as the supplier of human needs.

Secondly I think we can learn to share from this account. Like the boy, many people will probably have brought their lunch with them. They were not part of a takeaway society that picks up something whilst they are out. Maybe some had called on friends or relatives on the way and they had shared their hospitality and brought things with them as they joined the throng. It is so much more fun when, as a church, we have a bring and share lunch than when we all sit separately and eat what we have brought from home. At the Toddler Time picnic on Thursday people sat in small groups, but offered food to those in neighbouring groups, it was a good experience to be safely among so many people eating together and I expect there was quite a bit of cake left over. In my mind, I am not certain whether Jesus literally multiplied the food or that his offering to share a little, led to people being prepared to share what they had, but, either way, I still see it as a miracle that so many people were physically fed and that there were leftovers.

When I used to teach this in school I would make it a practical lesson. I would take a well known chocolate bar (no nuts) and offer to share it with the class. After the initial excitement there was the realisation that this chocolate bar was not going to go far amongst 30 students. I would cut it into 8 pieces and put a piece with each group. I would then ask if they had anything they could add to the table. Never mind what time of day the lesson was there was always a supply of sweets, crisps, biscuits and suddenly my little piece of chocolate didn't look so lonely. The lesson was one that would be remembered as they were allowed to eat in class and anyone who was taught by me will tell you that I was normally very quick to offer students the bin if they were chewing in class!

Interaction with others and sharing what we have, however small, helps us to be more aware of others and generous with the blessings that God has given us. It wouldn't have been much of a miracle if Jesus had thanked the boy and eaten the loaves and fish Himself, neither would it have shown compassion or the power of God.

My third learning point is that Jesus feeds us spiritually. Later in the chapter He says 'I am the Bread of Life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty'. Just as we need to nourish our bodies to keep them healthy and drink to keep them hydrated so we need spiritual sustenance for our souls.

We need to learn what Jesus would do in different situations and try to follow his example. We need spiritual moments in our daily lives, quiet time in prayer with God, moments of awe at His wonderful creation, time to praise Him and time to study His word. Bread is an important source of sustenance; now it is also an analogy for money: we need to share what we have with those who are less fortunate and in doing so show them Jesus' love and compassion. By acting the way Jesus would, we enable ourselves to grow spiritually.

The Gospel passage ends with the disciples getting into a boat and setting off across the lake for Capernaum. Jesus is not with them and the waters become rough with a high wind. The disciples are terrified, and some of those disciples were used to being on the water as fishermen. Even they are scared. Then they see Jesus walking across the water to them. He tells them not to be afraid and immediately they are safe at the shore. Is this another miracle or is it an illustration that without Jesus in our lives we are lost and in turmoil? I started this sermon by talking about the joy of food. As Christians we need to feed our faith in a similar way to the way we feed our bodies. It needs to be a regular happening, with a variety of spiritual foods to keep a balance. Jesus is the nourishment that keeps our spiritual lives growing. It is our faith in Him that enables us to know God for ourselves, grow as individuals and as a church and then to show God's love in the world.