



Sermon preached by Dr Janet Bottoms on 25th July 2021

Readings: John 6: 1-21; 2 Kings 4: 18, 42-44; Ephesians 3: 14-21

The story of “the feeding of the five thousand”, as it is usually called, is indeed a strange one. and yet it is probably one that many people know from childhood – a good story to tell children because of the presence in it of a boy. On the other hand, it may also be a story that we tend to avoid, perhaps unconsciously. Healings are fine; parables are popular; but is this story just a little too strange for us to cope with? Do we try to explain it away?

Whatever we may feel, it is one of the stories about Jesus that all four of the evangelists tell, and this is not as obvious as it might seem, because they don’t all tell all the same stories - or in the same way. In fact it may surprise you to discover that it is only John’s gospel that mentions a boy - an un-named boy, who brings the food that Andrew takes to Jesus, and then disappears from the story. The other evangelists give us other elements or shape their account differently, but it is a story that each of them includes in his gospel so they must see it as important, and the main events are the same in all the accounts.

Jesus has tried to get away to a quiet place where he could spend time, alone, with his disciples, but the crowds follow them and he says they must be fed. Each gospel emphasizes how small the amount of food available is. Each tells how the people were made to sit down in an orderly way and then fed with such abundance that they couldn’t eat it all - and at Jesus’s insistence that nothing must be wasted the disciples gather up twelve baskets-full of left-overs.

These are the basic elements of the story but all four evangelists are selective in what else they do or don’t include, depending on what they see as its importance in the context of the whole gospel story: its significance or, to use John’s word, its “**sign**”. John does not see every event or healing as a sign in quite this way; in fact, he uses the term just seven times. Clearly each of these occasions is, for him a pointer to something of particular significance; which raises for us the question “just what is the sign pointing to?” Signs may be misread – misinterpreted, as will happen in John’s account here, though the misinterpreting may itself be important and doesn’t make the story any less significant.

The other evangelists don’t use the word “sign” but they also shape their stories or emphasize different aspects of it according to how they interpret the event. Mark (and Matthew follows him in this) says that as Jesus “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.” He had compassion for them. According to the prophet Ezekiel, writing at the time of Israel’s exile in Babylon, it is God who has compassion on his people, accusing the leaders of Israel as being like shepherds who feed only themselves. Should not shepherds feed the sheep? he says; but, “You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost.” Therefore, says Ezekiel, “the Lord himself will search for his sheep. He will seek the lost, and bring back the strayed, and bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak”; and moreover, in the future, he will set up over them one shepherd who will feed them and be their shepherd. Mark does not actually quote that passage, or say that Jesus referred to it, but it is clear enough how he interprets the event. What he sees as significant is Jesus filled with the Spirit, the Compassion of God. This is what he shows us.

John's treatment of the story is different. He introduces it with the words "the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near" and in his account, when Jesus looks up and sees a large crowd, the very first thing he says is – "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?"

For John this is not even a genuine question. It's a challenge to the disciples, for, says John, "he himself knew what he was going to do." He will insist that they look for some food, takes what they bring him so tentatively – after all, it is so inadequate - "gives thanks" to God, and feeds the people. As John tells it, this is like a Passover meal; not just food for the hungry but a sign of something more. And there is another sign in the obvious reminder of the food provided by God in the wilderness for his hungry people - bread from heaven, manna, abundant provision, enough to satisfy each person's need with nothing left on the ground, just as Jesus requires nothing should be left on the ground – nothing wasted. In John's gospel it is from this point that Jesus begins to preach about "the bread of life", the "true bread of heaven" that "comes down from heaven and *gives* life to the world".

Sadly, the people who receive the bread (and fish) on this occasion misinterpret what they have seen. As John tells us,

"When the people saw the sign that he had done they began to say, this is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

They try to take him by force (the word used here is very strong), to compel him to become their leader, their King. They want a king to lead them to freedom from Roman rule, just as Moses led the Israelites to freedom. They interpret the sign according to what they believe they need – and the way they believe God must act. Jesus sends the disciples away in case they, too, get caught up in the excitement; and then he dismisses the crowd and goes up into the hills, alone, to pray to his Father for guidance.

It is so easy to misread a sign, to look for what we want God to do, how we think God must act, and even what we think he expects us to do about it. So in humility and prayerfulness I would like to look for a moment at how God may be speaking to us, today, into our own situation, through this story. How can we interpret its message for us, today?

John begins his account by making clear that Jesus was challenging his disciples. The first thing he does is to ask Philip where they can buy bread for the crowd. Perhaps this is because they are near Bethsaida, Philip's own home town. However, Philip responds in horror: "six months wages wouldn't buy enough for each of them to get even a mouthful". How often is our first reaction to a challenge one that thinks "What would this cost us?" and balk at it? Or perhaps, like the other disciples, suggest it is someone else's responsibility. In the other three gospels, when the disciples beg Jesus to send the people away so they can buy their own bread, he replies bluntly "You feed them"; and in the face of their horrified reactions, adds, in effect, "Well, what have you got? Go and find out."

They must have been shocked at this. After all, it was always Jesus who did things, especially apparently impossible things, and feeding this crowd was obviously impossible.

They went, as instructed, to see what they could find and came back to announce "five small barley loaves, two little dried fish" – but what good was that among so many? Their resources – whether in money or material things, and certainly their abilities, were obviously inadequate. But there was one person, in John's story: a boy, a child, who was willing to offer what he had. And we know Jesus said about children. "Of such is the kingdom of heaven": and also "unless you change and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." The boy, the child, brings what he has, and Jesus accepts it, blesses it, gives it to the disciples, and the people are fed and satisfied – full up. There is even some left over to be given to others who need it.

Is this the message for us, today, as we consider the next steps in our calling to serve God and our neighbours, and those outside our door. Our resources - what we are, who we are, what we have to offer - are woefully inadequate, but if we bring them to Jesus, place them in his hands, in faith, he will bless them, and put them back into our hands, multiplied, powered by his Spirit.

This, I think, is where we must turn to the Epistle to the Ephesians, and to Paul's prayer to God who, by the power that is working within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can hope or imagine" Jesus accomplished so much more than the disciples were able to imagine by working on and through the gift offered in trust by the boy. We should also notice that Paul writes in the plural - we / you/ all – and that we may have "*the power to comprehend*". To comprehend doesn't just mean to understand; it is to grasp hold of, to encompass and embrace totally "the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may filled with all the fullness of God."

Of course that's impossible - and yet, when the "you" means "all of us", all the "members of the household of God" we can learn more, comprehend more and do more, between us; being "rooted and grounded in love" and "strengthened in our inner beings with power through his spirit."

This is a faith process and journey - a learning in faith. Too often we are tempted to think that a challenge or a problem is too big. We haven't the resources or we haven't the confidence to offer them. Yet we are all called to be disciples and apostles - learners and witnesses – as well as members of God's household. Together we are charged with supporting and encouraging one another, and offering our gifts to be blessed and used, in faith, wherever God shows us the need.

And there is one more *sign* in the story we read today – a private sign for disciples, not for the crowd. When Jesus came down from the mountain where he had been praying alone, the disciples were out on the sea of Galilee in their boat, rowing hard, and making very slow progress, through the choppy waters thrown up by a cross wind from the hills - struggling to keep going. And it was at that point that Jesus came to them – apparently walking on the sea– impossible – unimaginable – "and they were terrified". But Jesus said to them "It is I" which, in Hebrew can be read two ways – both "It's only me" and "I am", the name of God. As he said to Moses – "I am who I am. You shall say to the people **I AM** has sent me." I'm not sure which would be more terrifying to hear. But Jesus also says, "do not be afraid". "Then they wanted to take him into the boat." When the way gets difficult, may we also hear those words; "It is I - I AM with you - don't be afraid." – and take him into the boat. Amen.