

Feeding the hungry

Amongst all of Jesus' miracles recorded across the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the story of the feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle that is recorded in all four accounts.

We call it the feeding of the five thousand, but it was five thousand men – which is how crowds were measured at the time – but the crowd was five thousand men plus women and children. It was certainly more than five thousand, probably ten to fifteen thousand, maybe even 20,000 or more people who were fed that day.

Whatever the number, though, it was a huge crowd. But wherever Jesus went, large crowds gathered.

At this point in Matthew's gospel, Jesus had just been rejected by the people in his hometown.

His disciples had just returned from the mission trip that he'd sent them on. Jesus had just heard that King Herod had beheaded Jesus' own cousin, John the Baptist.

It was certainly a dramatic time for Jesus and his followers – big things were happening, scary things were happening. But the crowds kept coming to Jesus – to be healed, to hear, to receive hope. We have accounts in the gospels of Jesus withdrawing from the crowds, to get away either alone or with his closest friends, to rest and to pray – and I guess to recharge for whatever would come next.

They tried to get away by getting into a boat and crossing the Sea of Galilee to a deserted place. It was a good plan, but when the people heard that Jesus had done that, they walked around the shore and found him.

I can imagine the disciples sighing and rolling their eyes when they saw the crowd – and no doubt they were tempted to get Jesus back in the boat and try to find somewhere the crowd couldn't get to. But when Jesus saw that the crowds had followed them, Matthew tells us that Jesus had compassion on them and healed their sick. (14:4)

After having failed to get away from the crowd, there was another problem for the disciples, and they brought the problem to Jesus: As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food." (14:5)

That was a reasonable thing to suggest – the people had spontaneously walked around the lake to see and hear Jesus. They hadn't planned to be doing that, and they certainly hadn't considered what they'd do for dinner.

Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."

But they didn't have enough to feed ten thousand or more people. They only had five loaves and two fish – and that wouldn't exactly have been a huge meal for Jesus and the twelve disciples. And yet Jesus was telling them to feed the crowd.

The disciples knew that five loaves and two fish wouldn't satisfy the need. But they were forgetting who Jesus was. They'd seen miracles, of course, but the possibility of a miracle here didn't seem to occur to them.

Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. God who had provided manna and water in the desert for the children of Israel (Exodus 16:2-3 and Numbers 20:1-6). God who had provided food for Elijah and the widow.

Jesus asked for the loaves and fish, and told the crowd to sit down. We heard that Jesus took the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people.

He distributed the loaves among the people. Everyone had more than enough to eat – after they'd had their fill, the disciples collected twelve baskets of leftovers. There was more left over at the end of dinner than there was at the beginning.

The people would be hungry again, of course. And many people in the world today are hungry. It seems that we don't have the resources to feed all the hungry people in the world. What can we do to make a difference?

But there are people who do make a difference – and seem to perform miracles with inadequate resources. Jesus was compassionate to the crowd on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and he remains compassionate today. When his disciples give him what they have, he can multiply by thousands.

What can we as followers of Jesus do? So often what we can do seems so little, that there's no point in doing it. What are five loaves going to do in the face of ten thousand hungry people? What is a hand of comfort on the shoulder of someone who has just lost their spouse? What is a ten minute phone call to someone who spends the rest of their time alone?

So often God works through the small and insignificant, to make big differences.

It was a seemingly insignificant man raised up on a cross by the Roman authorities on a hill outside Jerusalem, who would rise from the dead and open the way for us to have everlasting life with him.

We're going to share in Holy Communion today. We going to divide a loaf as Jesus did, and have a small insignificant piece of bread as a reminder of what Jesus has done for us.

All those years ago, on the shore of the lake, the disciples brought the loaves, and Jesus provided the miracle. Today, at times, we all feel insignificant and worry about we do. But whatever it is that we do, God will use it to the glory of his kingdom.

Amen