#  Genesis 32.22-31 p.27Matthew 14.13-21p.13

**6th August 2023**

##  Fed their mouths as well as preaching.

*Lord God – our prayer is that the written word will point us to Christ, the Living Word. So, in his name we pray and for his voice we listen. Amen.*

Our last Sunday Lunch at church had a quiz based on the theme of fish – apparently it was something like National Fishing Day! Anyway, one trick question in the true or false section talked about the five fish and two loaves.

I’m ashamed to say I didn’t notice the quantities had been deliberately swapped around and, of course, should have read five loaves and two fish. So, my table dropped a point, and I was left with my reputation in taters!!

This is one of the most famous of all the gospel stories, so let’s look at it this morning in three ways.

And the first prism we’ll use is to think of it as a narrative. What’s the story?

Well, a really important thing to note is that these are days of personal bereavement for Jesus. The opening verses of Matthew 14 speak of the brutal murder of his cousin, John the Baptist, by Herod. In a macabre moment the king serves up the severed head on a platter. It was a gruesome feast and in this chapter is skilfully juxtaposed alongside a much more generous and wholesome one as Jesus feeds a multitude with the loaves and fishes.

But let’s not move on too quickly in the narrative but linger with Jesus as he receives the news of his cousin’s death. For we read his response is to search for solitude, to get into a boat, cross the 8 miles to the other side and spend some time in a remote place. Just like us, in bereavement, the Lord Jesus, needs some space and time.

And perhaps the other side of the lake gave him that. For the Capernaum side was heavily populated. The region of Galilee was just 50 miles long and 25 miles wide. It wasn’t huge yet it had no less than 204 towns, all with at least 15,000 residents in each. Space could be found, either on the other side of the lake, or in the nooks and crannies of the nearer shoreline and that seems to be what Jesus craves now – solitude, peace and the healing property of quiet space.

Yet, not for long. For as he comes ashore, he’s greeted by a huge crowd who have tracked him down.

We are not entirely sure what went on during this part of the story. In Matthew’s gospel we are told Jesus, far from being angry that his moment of solitude had been snatched from him, reaches out to the crowd, indeed his heart went out to them, and he did many miracles among them. In other gospels we read of a time of preaching and teaching.

Either way it got late, and the place was remote. People were hungry and only a small supply of food is to be found, yet these limited resources were blessed by Jesus, probably saying the same prayer that every Jewish family would have used before a meal: *Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth…*In a moment of divinely inspired generosity this crowd of over 5,000 men and women are fed. Unlike Herod’s meal of hatred this is Jesus’ feast of love.

Now, a second prism through which we might to look in considering this story is to use our imagination and try to dwell within the narrative.

Maybe try it for yourself this week, just to live in it and maybe even take the part of one of the characters and imagine it through their eyes.

I can imagine the bustle of the crowd. Perhaps being invited by a friend to come along and then find there were hundreds from my town all walking down to the shore because news had been received that this wonder working radical teacher was there.

I imagine I was with likeminded friends, that maybe we’d gone to Sabbath School together and we all longed for the dawning of a new age, one in which we could throw off the shackles of Roman dominance and become once more a free community. We’ve heard reports that this Jesus of Nazareth does amazing things and preaches inspiring words. Our walk to meet him is full of hope, longing and expectation. And as we go, we’re picking up quite a crowd, we pass one village after another and our procession to the shoreline is growing by hundreds, and in our hearts, there grows a buzz of excitement that maybe this Jesus is the real deal, and just maybe we are not just an inquisitive crowd but the foot soldiers of a liberation army on the cusp of something big. In fact, all in all, I can imagine that this would be one of the most exciting days of my entire life.

And then we reach the lake, Galilee is glistening in the afternoon sun and already Jesus is moving amongst those who arrived before us. He shares words of hope and offers out a hand of blessing and prayer. As he comes my way, I look at the way he treats people. In a crowd now of thousands he seems to make every person feel as if it's just him and them on the shoreline. He looks into my eyes, smiles and prays for me, laying his hand upon my head. His prayer is that I may know God’s peace, God’s shalom, today and always.

I didn’t know what to expect, yet I felt the encounter was simply so much greater than I ever could have expected. In words and actions, I sensed I had met with truth, integrity and kindness. I was glad to be in this crowd, glad that we were gathered around Jesus.

But, of course, the sun began to set, and the evening air turned chilly, and I started to feel hungry.

I had brought no provisions because we had all left our homes on an impulse.

Jesus’ team of disciples seemed to be fusing and whispering to their master. They looked worried and gesticulated with their hands.

Their anxiety became infectious and for a moment even a crowd as big as ours felt vulnerable now the sun was setting.

It was then that I saw a young boy being brought up to Jesus, and from a small leather bag he handed over a parcel wrapped in hessian. Jesus bent down and smiled at him as he took it. He then lifted it to heaven and said a prayer of blessing before giving it to a disciple. Jesus sat down with the lad beside him, and the disciples brought over some food for them both, they hardly noticed as they were engaged in conversation with Jesus and the boy laughing together.

And then, we all sat down, and the anxiety disappeared, and food was shared round and we all started talking and laughing. We ate with joy before the scrapes were collected, twelve baskets in all.

Jesus stood up, prayed for us once more and told us now was the time to return home. As I left, I looked back and saw his disciples had got into a boat whilst he, after spending the day with thousands of us, was now making his way, all by himself, up the hill.

An afternoon to remember, a meal never to be forgotten.

Well, I like to think it might have been like that!

So, what’s the third and final prism? Well, it asks the question: *What might it all mean?*It’s the prism we might call *theology* or application*.* Because the stories of Jesus can go deep.

When I ponder the loaves and fish and how they fed a multitude I reflect on those numerous meals recorded in the gospels. Eating with others was a really big part of Jesus’ life. Whether that was at Bethany alongside Mary, Martha and Lazarus, at the homes of Pharisees when some thought Jesus a turncoat for accepting their dinner invitation, tea with Zacheus or fish rolls with thousands, all these meals – alongside the self-description made by Jesus of the Bread of Life – make a connection with the Last Supper in the Upper Room, which we re-enact today in the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Meals that speak of fellowship, of being welcomed around the table, of listening and learning, encountering new truth and rising from the meal changed. In these meals blessings were spoken and bread was broken and being became companions.

After so many meals is it any wonder that our Lord closes his ministry with that special one in an Upper Room where, once again, he broke and blessed the bread, prayed over and then poured out the wine. So that in the eating and drinking there could be remembrance, thanksgiving and dedication.

And then, by the shore as the sun went down, we meet a very practical Jesus. One who is never so heavenly minded that he was of no earthly use. He has preached, healed and prayed – all the expected actions of a wise and loving rabbis, and now he provides, he provides just as a mother would at table for her children or a host would for invited guests.

How does the Iona hymns so beautifully put it. This was the Jesus who *fed their mouths as well as preaching.*A practical, compassionate, down to earth Saviour whose actions that late afternoon has inspired millions of acts of kindness and expressions of compassion in the name of Jesus.

And then, as I think of a way of applying this story, I’m glad it was only five loaves and two fish. So, little for so many, a hopeless case, a limited response. Well, yes. But isn’t that the point of the narrative.

Our limited resources may not seem much to bring to great tasks, yet that is all we can bring. And in God’s hands it so often feels as if they are multiplied. An hour given to a granddaughter JUST listening to her worries, means the world. A so-called small gift made to our mission offerings, when combined with thousands of such gifts, makes life changing contributions to folk in the developing world. Those few hours you dedicate to your local church, your neighbourhood community centre, your parent teacher association – time you carve out of a busy day because you believe in your church, community centre or parent association, is never time wasted and seems to bring life and unexpected possibilities to those causes which place others at the centre.

Five loaves and two fish – in God’s hands in can make a world of difference.

And then finally, as we blend the prisms of narrative, imagination and application together this morning maybe we should end with the boy who gave Jesus the 5 loaves and 2 fish – the boy who is mentioned in John’s account of today’s story.

What impression would the day’s events have made in his life? Indeed, who might he have become in the opening chapters of the church’s life?

He is nameless. Yet I suspect if he became part of the story of the New Testament Church, he never forgot that moment by Lake Galilee when his food, blessed by Jesus, was used to feed a multitude. Maybe he remembered it every time he took communion, maybe he remembered it every time he heard a prayer of blessing, maybe he remembered it at that moments when he gave to God all he had, however small, and prayed once more than divine generosity would make it enough to be a blessing of love to others.

In the name of Jesus, the who took loaves and fish, bread and wine. And blesses us today. Amen.

*Ian Green, Amersham, 3rd August 2023*