**29th July 2018
Ephesians 3.14-21
John 6.1-21**

## Be not Afraid

Introduction to the Theme

Bread has traditionally been so important to us that it has even become a euphemism for our very existence. Where would we be without our *Daily Bread?*

Opting for a low carbohydrate diet is something of a First World privilege. In many countries to have access to bread at all is to have access to life.

Of course, living close, as we do, to Chorleywood where a bread making process was invented in 1961 that is still used in 90% of production today, and having a member of the Worshipful Company of Bakers as one of our elders, means I need to be a touch careful about what I say about bread this morning!

Yet, what I would say is that stories like the Feeding of the 5000, which is part of our Gospel for today, show us just how important bread was both as a physical reality and as a spiritual concept in the days of Jesus.

Jesus’ message generally got a fairer hearing in villages rather than towns. It was the poor who opened their hearts to him. These hearers were probably mostly subsistence market gardeners whose bread was usually made from barley flour than refined white flour. Indeed, the 2 loaves in the little boys’ lunch box at the Feeding of the 5000 are described as barley loaves.

Today we start a run of Sundays from John’s gospel, a short summer break from this year’s set book of Mark. And John thinks of the miracles of Jesus as signs. Signs that point to who he really was: the image of God with a human face. So, the Feeding of the 5000 is the 4th sign, Walking on Water is the 5th, and later the Healing of the Blind Man and the Raising of Lazarus, they are the 6th and 7th signs in John’s gospel, with the Resurrection of Jesus, some argue as the ultimate, and 8th sign.

So John, as well as valuing each miracle for its physicality and for the wholeness these healings brought to people, he also layers them with an even deeper and more enduring meaning because for him every miracle is a signpost telling us something about Jesus, and therefore about God.

A blind man receives his sight and is lifted out of perpetual darkness and John calls Jesus the Light of the World. Lazarus is raised and John calls Jesus The Resurrection and The Life. And today, as 5000 are fed John thinks of Jesus as the Bread of Life.

So, this morning we will visit again the two venues of today’s gospel. A secluded field in which thousands listen to a message that thrills their souls before being gifted bread that fills their bodies. And a storm on Lake Tiberias when Jesus, the one they had left behind, joins them again and utters words that are so precious to us 2000 years later: *Be not afraid.*At every turn in John’s writings there are two levels or layers. All he describes physically, like a mass feeding or the stilling of a storm, can also be understood spiritually. One points to the other, and both point to Jesus.

Sermon: Be not Afraid

We have two of the most remembered gospel stories in today’s New Testament set readings. The Feeding of the 5000 and Jesus walking on the water are so dramatic that they naturally fit into the top ten of what must be the best stories of the life of Jesus.

The loaves and fishes narrative is even repeated with its second outing being to 4000. Scholars tell us that’s a way of saying the message of Jesus as the Bread of Life was given to the Jews who are represented by the number 5000, and also to the Gentiles, represented by the number 4000. There’s no doubt there’s quite a lot of code work going on in scripture and when we break that code the message can be deepened.

The Feeding of the 5000, as I remember being told in Sunday Schol, is the one miracle that appears in all four gospels. It’s there in the earliest gospel, Mark, written about 70AD, it crops up in both Matthew and Luke which see the light of day some 15 years later in 85AD and is found in today’s lectionary reading from John, the final gospel to be ‘published’ around AD90.

Maybe we know the story well and perhaps we know it too well that it no longer surprises us. Well, where can we find its sacredness today?

John’s account builds on the one told by Mark twenty years earlier – so this was already a story that had been around for quite a while.

Jesus withdraws. We meet that quite often in his routine. Jesus seems to value rhythm and retreat in his life. Periods of intense activity are followed by dedicated times of space for reflection. And this begins at such a time. He goes to the other side of Lake Galilee and climbs a hill to be alone with his disciples.

Perhaps John is making a point here about the backdrop to Jesus’ ministry. He preached at a time when the people felt a sense of oppression from an occupying power, that of Rome.

Even the lake over which Jesus is travelling, in John’s gospel, isn’t given its local name of Galilee, but referred to as Lake Tiberius, named after the current emperor. When they start calling even your lakes after their rulers you sense Rome wants domination. And that’s also probably why John specifically sets chapter 6 of his gospel during the season of Passover. This was the quintessential celebration of freedom. It told of the liberation of an enslaved people from their Egyptian masters and now in this passage it’s the backdrop of similar hopes of many of John’s readers who long for freedom from Roman occupation. Passover and Lake Tiberias, yet more code lurking just below the surface of the text.

So, Jesus is on his Passover Retreat, yet he’s interrupted by the growing crowd of people who had followed him across the lake.

It’s a truly massive group of people. Go to the Albert Hall and you’ll be surrounded by a further 5,271 concert goers if the place is full. We couldn’t believe it back in 2017 when we took Hauke, our Time for God volunteer twice to the Albert Hall and he sat in the same seat on both occasions. What’s the chances of that – perhaps you mathematicians in the congregations will tell me afterwards.

Well, go to see Jesus that afternoon and it was estimated there were at least as many men there as could fill the Albert Hall, and if, on average, every one of them brought their wife and 2.4 children, might we actually be talking, in the region of, the Feeding of the 20,000!

Of course, no one had booked the caterers! Yet everyone is fed, and 12 baskets of leftovers were collected – which is microscopic if you think about it!

All of this seems to make an excited crowd even more overawed than when they arrived. They obviously felt Jesus was the real deal and bit by bit the idea got around that they should make him king there and then.

Well all of this enthusiasm is played down, and the next scene is presumably the journey home, back to the other side of the lake. It’s been a long day full of conflicting emotions and now an unwelcome and frightening storm has blown up.

The disciples are travelling alone, yet all of a sudden, a figure, walking on water, appears before them. It’s Jesus. He comes to them in their despair and says: *Be not afraid*. And as soon as they take him on board it’s as if the boat immediately makes landfall.

What a day! A day, John is saying to us, that is rich in symbolism and has more layers of meaning than simply the literal.

No Jewish reader of this ‘Jesus story’ probably fails to see its similarity to one told about the prophet Elisha in 2 Kings 4. In the Elisha encounter twenty barley loaves are used to feed a crowd of one hundred and there is some left over.

So, the evangelist John is taking what is already a very established tale and, in his gospel, he is layering it with deep meaning.

For John the importance of these stories is never their factual detail because he’s not interested in their historicity but their symbolism. What do they stand for? What do they teach us about Jesus?

It’s often pointed out that Jesus’ actions during the Feeding of the 5000 bear a remarkable similarity to those he used at the Last Supper. He takes bread, give thanks for bread, breaks bread and then distributes bread. In one it is physical bread, in the other it is himself, the Bread of Life, which will be given for us, and broken for us upon Good Friday’s cross.

Taken that way, the Feeding of the 5000 doesn’t promise an instant cure for world hunger. We sometimes wish for that! Instead, it’s coded message runs something like this. We face life’s problems together and again and again the solution is about self-giving love and sacrificial service. About living a life for others which resonates with the one lived by The Bread of Life.

Now, as I ponder these two stories, I just want to suggest a common factor that maybe links them. And I think it’s found in the second as Jesus approaches the boat, walking on water and says *Be not afraid.* You know that’s the most often repeated phrase found in the Bible, occurring around three hundred times. *Be not afraid.* Because fear can freeze us.

When we feel our problems, the world’s problems are so massive we can become overwhelmed with a sense of fear that nothing can be done.

Philip is a bit like that in the Feeding story. There’s this little boy here with a packed lunch, *but what is that amongst so many,* says Philip. He fears this is no solution.

In fact, that’s the language we all use from time to time, especially when we are desperate we say *I’m afraid I can’t see a way forward…I’m afraid there’s no solution.* I mean you’ll never hear someone say *I’m afraid I’ve found the answer!*

Fear freezes us and makes us feel there’s no way out. And perhaps that’s what the disciples felt on the lake that night in the boat. Yet Jesus comes along and says *Be not afraid.*We will spend a lifetime learning what it means to replace fear with trust; trust in God and trust in the love and care offered to us by others. Yet these lessons can be life’s most important unfreezing us from the grip of constantly feeling afraid and anxious.

Some lines of hymns seem to me to distil down the most profound truths into an economy of words that fit into a sentence and one such example that means a lot to me is from the hymn *Brother Sister let me serve you,* when it goes *I will hold the Christlight for you in the nighttime of your fear…*God’s answer to our deepest problems is often *community.* We don’t have to face our fears alone, God comes to us through and in the companionship and support of others. It’s why Dame Ciciley Saunders founded the Hospice Movement, she knew how fearful it was for terminal ill folk, and their families, to face death alone. But whenever I visit hospices today, I’m struck by the warmth, support and dignified compassion I encounter.

It's surely so significant that it’s a little boy who becomes part of the answer in the story of the Feeding of the 5000. Yes, we might believe that God does use human beings to help human beings – that will be the rich sharing with then poor, the Global North standing alongside the Global South. Well, yes, thankfully that’s part of the answer. Yet the surprise in today’s gospel is that in the topsy turvey world of the Kingdom of God even the weak, the fragile and the smallest player on stage can have a part to play and be used by God. play. And sometimes our biggest fears will be quelled by the smallest incident, a supposedly insignificant conversation or maybe even by the example of the least noticed person in the room. Yet God can use even the most fragile member of our family, church or community to be that channel through which his blessings flow and our fears are relieved.

Fear can freeze us. We can end up doing nothing. Trust, in God and each other, frees us and helps us take the next step.

A final illustration. I was listening to Dr Edward Kessler on the radio recently. He is a wonderful man responsible for setting up the Woolf Institute in Cambridge University as an Inter-faith centre for dialogue.

He was asked about the current crisis between Israel and Gaza. A crisis which, let’s be honest, have frozen many of us with fear. We might even say *I’m afraid I can’t see any solution.*

Dr Kessler understands this and says October 7th has, indeed, made interfaith dialogue more difficult than he can ever remember in his lifetime. Leaders have retreated into false certainties. Activists chant louder with slogans that can never be achieved.

And yet, he says, there are small pockets of Israeli and Arab academics, families, and communities dotted around the Middle East, and after a lifetime in this area he knows who they are and where they are, who haven’t given in to fear and who haven’t surrendered to a *no hope* scenario for the future. Edward Kessler says it will be these little, fragile groups who will, as it were bring their 2 loaves and five fish, and from their words and from their dialogue fear will diminish and a way of hope will eventually emerge.

And, pray God that will happen, as the smallest of lights grows to become a flame of hope that banishes fear.

In the anxieties of life let us remember that God can come to us in so many ways, and whether that’s walking or water or offering up a picnic lunch, the message is always the same *Be not afraid.*May in be so in the name of God who in Jesus blessed and broke the bread and who, through the offering of a little boy’s lunch banished fear and enabled abundance. Amen
 *Ian Green, Amersham, 23rd July 2024*