

The Feeding of the 5000

John 6:5-14 – Sarah Penfold

Who would want to be a government statistician at the moment? True there are plenty of numbers to get busy with but how do they retain clinical objectivity when the numbers they are dealing with refer so directly to life and death? How do they do this without appearing heartless? This story of the miraculous feeding also contains a lot of numbers but for today we will think of them as indicators of the magnitude of what happened, rather than attribute them with any mathematical significance.

Accounts of feeding large numbers of people are found in all four of the Gospels but I have confined myself to John's version of events. So what are the facts that he reports?

Jesus challenges Philip – 'Where can we buy enough food for them to eat?'

Philip replies that it would take many months wages to give everyone a little food.

Andrew has become aware of a boy who has a packed lunch.

There is a significant crowd to feed

Jesus gives thanks over the food, and it is distributed.

The quantity of leftovers exceeds the original lunch.

It is Jesus who raises the issue of the crowd being hungry, rather than the crowd themselves or the disciples. Are they so wrapped up in listening that they are unaware of when they last ate? Could it be that he was aware of their reluctance to be disruptive by wanting to seek food? Or given that this was a poor area with people used to living from day to day, was being hungry simply an inevitable consequence of spending time listening to the preacher rather than working. But he challenges the disciples through Philip, to do something about this hungry crowd.

I think my immediate reaction to a challenge like this would be along the lines of, 'But we didn't invite them to come, in fact we were trying to have a quiet time just Jesus and us, his friends. They should have brought food with them'. Philip looks at the crowd and the thought of feeding them just blows his mind. It would cost an amount of money he can't imagine having, but Jesus is asking him to do just that.

Andrew has found a boy who has brought his lunch. There is so much we don't know about what happened. Perhaps others in the crowd noticed him and pointed him out, Andrew may even have rescued him from having it taken from him. People in this crowd had hunger caused by missing more than one day's lunch. His offering is tiny, some small barley rolls with a little bit of fish. But I like to imagine that the child offered his food willingly to the preacher. That in the way that children, with minds less cluttered by 'what ifs' or previous bad experience, instinctively do the right thing.

And Jesus blesses this food and turns one small meal into a feast for a large gathering, with baskets full of left overs.

What a series of challenges this incident presents us with. The same challenge made to Philip to feed the hungry, the challenge made by inference and demonstrated by the child that it matters that we do what we can, and the challenge to have faith that it will make a difference. The challenge to understand that God has more than enough love for everyone. Challenges so topical that it is almost difficult to remember that they come from 2000 years ago.

Our world has changed so rapidly over the last few months that we have all been challenged as to what we should do. Ironically it is easier to get our heads around the food issues. People are no longer working, some covered by Government furlough schemes, others less effectively by Universal Credit which has led to more people unable to afford the food they need. According to the Trussell Trust website they gave out 1.2 million food parcels between April and September last year. That's parcels not individuals who received them, and locally the feeling is that the proportion going to families has increased. (And the Trussell Trust is not the only charity providing food.) Philip was appalled at the thought of it costing over half a year's wages to feed the crowd. According to those government statisticians half a year's wages last year was about £15,500, not much to feed even a crowd of 5,000.

'They also serve, who only stand and wait'. The last line of a poem by John Milton which as a child I saw as the lazy person's charter. So, it is OK to do nothing? Yes, it can be, in the right context. Doing what we can does not have to be rushing around, fingers in every pie. Over the last year we have come to appreciate the value of patient, socially distanced queuing, and of staying at home. Whether it is foremost in our minds to protect ourselves, our friends or the NHS, keeping away from others and preventing the spread of infection is a

part we can all play. We can all do what we can. We have been doing what we can. Nobody pretends that it is easy or what they want to be doing. I'm sure I'm not the only person who has recently realised how much I appreciated having coffee with a friend.

Like the child with the picnic, or the shepherds who could only have brought a lamb to the nativity, our contribution can seem small but when given willingly can make a difference. None of us can singlehandedly solve the big issues at the moment, poverty, Covid, climate change, but those small things that we can do really do make a difference. In talking and thinking about what we can do we can also make our small things more effective. I'm thinking of sending powdered milk which is always needed, to the foodbank instead of pasta. That sort of thing. My Somerset relations are getting their milk from vending machines at the gates of local farms – no plastic involved as you take responsibility for your own glass bottles, washing and refilling them yourselves. Not possible here although the milkmen still call.

Now sometimes people will speculate that Jesus did not actually increase the loaves and fishes but that in offering his lunch the child shamed all the others who had brought food into getting it out. For me that does not sit with the original conversation between Philip and Jesus. If the food was already there why would he have challenged Philip. Miraculously the small picnic was multiplied so that it fed the crowd. We should take encouragement that if we also have faith that our small actions - staying at home, praying for the future of the church in Shirley, the tin of corned beef we donated to the foodbank – when added to others and taken into God's hands can make a real difference to the world in the future. Our small acts of love added to that overwhelming reservoir of God's love can be shared out with plenty for everyone.