

Morning Worship – Sunday 2nd August - Trinity 8

Sermon – Nick Ball

Isaiah 55:1-5

Matthew 14:13-21

What's it like to feel hungry? I once did a 28 hour fast in Portsmouth organised by Christian Aid. It lasted from 8am on Saturday morning till midday and we spent most of Saturday sitting on the steps of Portsmouth Guildhall. It's nearly fifty years ago now, but if I remember rightly the Saturday wasn't too bad, but I was very glad when midday on Sunday arrived and some food was provided. In today's Gospel reading the crowd of 5000 men, plus women and children had only been without food for eight or so hours, but Jesus clearly thought that their hunger was an important issue. So we have the miracle of the Feeding of the 5000. It's the only miracle story that appears in all four gospels apart from the stilling of the storm that appears in different forms in the four gospels.

The feeding of the 5000 appears in 2 forms in Mk and Matt, where there is the feeding of 5000 and then the feeding of the 4000. The feeding of the 5000 appears in a similar form in Luke. And then in John the story has some other points of detail, such as it being a small boy in the crowd, who offers his five bread loaves and two fish to Jesus. John also tells us that the crowd wanted to seize Jesus and make him king, but Jesus passed through the crowd and escaped from them.

John is also different in that the miracle is followed immediately by the stilling of the storm and then by an exposition, which contains the I am saying, 'I am the bread of life' and Jesus's teaching on the Eucharist, which climaxes in the statement, 'those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day'.

Now it is difficult if not impossible to explain the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. Some commentators suggest that everyone just received a small token amount of food as we do in the Eucharist: others suggest that the boy's willingness to share persuaded everyone to share what they had brought. We can be sure that Jesus saw what he was doing as something of divine significance because he looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves before he gave the bread and fish to the disciples to distribute them. John's comment about the crowd wanting to take him and make him king

suggests that the crowd saw the feeding as having Messianic significance, but Jesus's mysterious disappearance shows that this was not what he had in mind.

So what are we to make of this great miracle of the feeding of the 5000? I think the clue lies in the I am saying in John's gospel, 'I am the bread of life'. And I believe that the powerful saying 'I am the bread of life' needs to be applied on both a physical and a spiritual level.

First we need to interpret the miracle on a physical level. However it happened, the hunger of the crowd of 5000 plus women and children was met from the five loaves and the two fish. How we don't know, but it happened, just as God miraculously fed the people of Israel with manna in the desert.

The fact that so much was left over – twelve baskets full we are told – emphasises the physical nature of this miracle. The physical aspect of the miracle is a reminder that people need to receive their daily bread or rice in those parts of the world where rice is the staple diet. The Lord's Prayer includes the petition, 'Give us this day our daily bread'. Our daily bread is so vitally important that it merits inclusion in Jesus's model prayer.

Of course we tend to think of our daily bread as something that will be there for us whenever we want it. You may remember the bread strikes of 1972, when we had to queue for bread. It felt very strange indeed. But of course in some parts of the world, the daily bread is by no means guaranteed. People regularly face famine as a result of droughts or floods. That is why our support for Christian Aid and other relief organisations is so important. The government had decided to reduce the amount of aid it gives to some of the wealthier countries of our aid budget, but it will still give 0.7 per cent of our Gross National Income in foreign aid.

But the need isn't just in the poorer countries. Food Banks play a vital part in making sure that people in this country receive their daily bread. Even in this wealthy country people go hungry, often as a result of complications with their benefits, which is why the foodbank is so important. During the lockdown, Helen and I have been supporting Yardley Wood Baptist Church's Community Food Pantry, which gives food aid to the neediest families in the Yardley Wood, Billesley and Warstock areas.

So Jesus is the bread of life in a physical sense. He always holds up the needs of the poor and the hungry and he invites us to literally step up to the plate and

fill it for the needy. But Jesus is the bread of life in a spiritual sense as well. In John's gospel Jesus says to the crowd who have followed him, 'do not work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you'.

In this and the forty verses that follow Jesus gives an exposition of what it means to be the bread of life in a spiritual sense. It is one of the most powerful passages in the New Testament and it hinges around the great 'I am' saying, 'I am the bread of life', which appears in verse 35. Jesus compares himself to the manna in the wilderness with which God fed the Israelites on their journey to the Holy Land. The manna he says is physical food: he is giving the food of eternal life. And he insists that whoever believes has eternal life.

Jesus himself is the food of eternal life. We can interpret this in three ways. The first is to have faith in Jesus. 'Very truly, I tell you,' says Jesus in verse 47, 'whoever believes has eternal life' The second is to feed upon Jesus's teaching. Day by day we feed upon the word of God in the teaching of Jesus and he nourishes us with his Word. And the third sense is sacramental. In verse 56, Jesus says, 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them' By speaking of his blood as well as his flesh, we can be fairly certain that Jesus is talking about the Eucharist. In fact the account of the Last Supper in John's gospel there is no mention of the Eucharist. It is here in chapter six that John expounds the Eucharist as an essential way of feeding upon Jesus, the bread of life. In verse 54, he says, 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life and I will raise them up on the last day.'

Today is a special day for us in Shirley Parish as the Eucharist is celebrated for the first time since the middle of March. It is the first step to restoring normal worship in our church. Last Sunday I was privileged to celebrate St. Peter's Harborne's first Eucharist since lockdown. Like ours it was very pared down compared to usual but it was the Eucharist, worship focused upon Jesus the Bread of Life and it was a great joy.

But though the Eucharist is central to Christian worship and helps to give meaning to Jesus's statement that he is the Bread of Life, we mustn't forget the other ways in which our lives are focused on Jesus the bread of life: Jesus the physical feeder, who urges us to feed the poor, Jesus, the one in whom we believe and Jesus who feeds us with his teaching day by day.

The Jesus who feeds the 5000, says, 'I am the bread of life. This is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat of it and not die.'