

Holy Trinity & St Peter South Wimbledon Sermons

Feeding the 5000 (John 6.1–21)

By Mark Budden

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May I speak and may you listen in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It's very good to be with you this morning and not a little daunting to have been scheduled to be here with you on the first Sunday after David's last. Some of you will know that I was a member of this congregation for some 15 years before I was ordained, so it is very much like coming home when I return to what a dear friend once referred to as our beloved Holy Trinity.

I saw when I was here for David and Diana's party that you still love a good party with plenty of food. There was a delicious selection being shared that evening. Of course, our theme today is eating and partaking of what God offers us and provides for us. And it feels slightly ironic that this Sunday is the first of let's hope only a few when we are asked to receive Communion in only one kind so later when we come to celebrate the Eucharist together we will only be sharing bread and not sharing the cup.

Our Gospel lesson was one of the very familiar passages about the feeding of the five thousand, today taken from John's Gospel. The passage appears in slightly different forms in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and is 1 of the very few stories that appears in all 4; it would seem therefore that this is an important passage for us to reflect on.

Now if we had read the related Old Testament reading today, rather than the one from the continuous set which is on your service sheet, we would have read 2 Kings 4: 42–44 in which the prophet Elisha instructs a disciple to feed 100 men with twenty loaves of barley. The disciple demurs (How can I set this before so many?" but Elisha replies "Thus says the Lord, they shall eat and have some left."

Then I wonder if we can think of another occasion in the Old Testament when the people were fed miraculously. If you were to look up Exodus, you would find the story of Moses feeding the Israelites with the manna which was sent down from heaven, but there are more similarities; like Moses, Jesus crosses the water into the desert, sits the people down in companies and feeds them with such miraculous food from heaven that there are basketfuls left over.

So in recapitulating what Moses did Jesus is fulfilling the Law and by recapitulating Elisha he recapitulates the Prophets. We see the same in the Transfiguration story, the passage I first ever preached on which was also here at Holy Trinity, when Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus and testify to him as the Messiah. Like the Transfiguration, this miracle is intended to teach us that Jesus is truly the one whom the Law and the Prophets foretold.

So is this only a passage about feeding? Well the Bread probably symbolises the Word of God, the message of salvation. The rabbis had already interpreted the manna in the desert as a symbol of God's word, which he sends down to feed them. When the story appears in Deuteronomy, Moses warns the people that God had fed them with manna in the desert in order to make them understand that one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God. When we read on in John's Gospel, we will find that John follows the feeding of the five thousand with a long discourse of Jesus on himself as the Bread of Life. There is an obvious link for us

with the Eucharist. In Mark's version, Jesus' actions over the bread are exactly those he describes as being those of Jesus at the Last Supper. In Mark's version, he refers to the fact that grass was green, linking it with the month of the year when the Passover fell, and it is not insignificant that John also mentions that he is setting his version explicitly at Passover time, so we will recall that the Last Supper was itself a Passover meal which Jesus shared with the disciples. We have in this story a foretaste of the heavenly banquet to which we are all invited and of which we have a foretaste whenever we gather around the altar and partake of the Eucharist.

So I wonder how we are to view this miracle. We could consider take it as a literal description of a miracle that Jesus performed for a very large crowd of people who came to hear him speak. Mark sees such miracles as being evidence of Jesus' divine power and identity. He also sees it as I have already suggested as a sign of the feast of the kingdom. To the Gospel writers this was a tremendous demonstration of God's free, overflowing, miraculous generosity; however stories like these also strengthen and illuminate our faith, that is, the relationship between Christ and us the hearers. For me, this is a depiction of the Eucharist, which is at the centre of my spirituality, by that I mean that I cannot imagine a week passing when I do not seek to receive Holy Communion at some time. In the Eucharist we find Jesus giving of himself in bread and wine, he is the one whom the Law and the prophets foretold. In it, Jesus takes, blesses, breaks and gives the bread for his people. It is the Christian Passover, when we are reminded each time we celebrate it that we are recalling the redemption won for us in Christ's death and passion, in the same way as the old Passover made present the redemption obtained for Israel. The manna came to be understood by the Jews as a symbol of the Word of God in the Law, or as God's Wisdom dwelling within us, so in the Eucharist we receive Christ the eternal Word of God, both in Scripture and in the sacrament. Like the Passover, the Eucharist is the Church's family meal, which sustains us through this earthly life. It is for all people. It shows us a glimpse of the eternal banquet.

So as we come in a few moments to share the Eucharist, let's give thanks (as the word Eucharist reminds us) for all that God has done for us, for his many blessings that we have received, and for the encouragement that we receive to work together for the coming of the Kingdom of God here in Wimbledon and on earth.