

Sunday 23rd August – Matthew 14:13-21: The Mystery of Multiplication

I'm sure many of you have had the experience at some point in your lives of looking in your cupboard or fridge one evening and realising it's going to be tricky to make a meal. You've got half a bag of rice, a couple of apples and a bag of KP dry roasted peanuts.

Perhaps even worse, you've got people coming round and you think you've bought everything to make the meal and then realise that a couple of key ingredients are missing. Have you got time to pop out to the shops and get back before your guests arrive? Or do you send your other half out with strict instructions to let themselves in secretly via the kitchen door when they get back?

In today's iconic story Jesus faces the ultimate such challenge – he's got a huge crowd of people in a remote place who are getting tired and hungry and all he has is effectively one packed lunch – 5 rolls and 2 fishes. What are he and his disciples going to do?

Well, we all know what happens next, don't we – this is one of those stories that even those with little knowledge of the Christian story may well have heard. Jesus blesses the food, which miraculously multiplies and everyone is fed. He also gives his disciples a great lesson in leadership, delegating responsibility and involving them at every point along the way – getting them to organise the groups, then distribute the food, then clear up afterwards. This is a miracle which involves everyone.

But why do this particular miracle? After all, plan A was just to send them to local villages to get food, they weren't at risk of starvation. And Jesus himself a few chapters earlier had rejected the idea of miraculously creating food for himself when he was tempted in the desert by Satan. Isn't this just the kind of showy miracle that seems out of character?

Even worse, Jesus has withdrawn to this remote place because he's heard about his cousin John the Baptist's execution by Herod, and this kind of spectacular material provision to a restless population could be construed as a direct challenge to the current king. In fact, the direct result of this miracle, as John tells it, is that the crowd wants to make Jesus king by force immediately.

So whilst we love this story, to really engage with it, it's important to recognise that *on lots of levels it's a bit odd*. And yet, it is the only miracle recorded in all four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. So it must matter, there must be something special about it.

I think partly that must be the sheer awesomeness of what Jesus did. This is **a sign of God's presence and provision on a massive scale**. It also tells us very clearly who Jesus is. There are two such miracles, this one and the feeding of the 4,000 a bit later. This miracle with the 5,000 happens in a Jewish area, and the disciples pick up 12 basketfuls – a clear reference to the 12 tribes of Israel. The 4,000 happens in a largely non-Jewish area, and the disciples pick up 7 basketfuls of leftovers. Since 7 is the biblical number for wholeness or completeness, this seems to be saying that **Jesus is the Messiah for all nations**, the completeness of the world, if you like.

In other words, by these two miracles, Jesus is declaring his identity as God's chosen rescuer for the whole world – both his own people, the Jews, and everyone else too.

But we can go further. What Jesus is also showing us is that **he is the only one who can meet our deepest needs**. The people could have gone back to their villages to eat – but *Jesus* feeds them. As John says, reporting Jesus' words: he is the Bread of Life. He is the one who feeds us with what we really need. Ironically it takes a miracle of physical feeding to make the point that Jesus nourishes us spiritually too.

And **this amazing God can multiply what we offer him**. Jesus takes a packed lunch and feeds a huge crowd. He takes *our* loaves and fishes and does great things. And that I believe is the message for us today. Often our lives are paralysed by inaction because we think to ourselves 'what's the point?' My little gift won't make a difference. But the feeding of the 5,000 tells us that every little gift offered to God for Him to use can be multiplied in its effect. God does great things with little gifts. Of course that's not to say that we only offer small gifts to God, but it does give us faith to believe that day-to-day our small gifts – a thoughtful word, a small act of kindness, an extra moment to say hello to our neighbour – can make a huge difference if we offer them for God's glory.

I've told this story before but a few years ago I was introduced to someone after our service at church in London who was very excited to meet me. She'd just become Christian, and the story goes that the week before I'd been singing one of the songs in the service and got a strong sense that there was someone there who had a problem with their left eye. I'd no idea who that was, but I shared it quietly with the service leader during the song. At the end of the service, the leader mentioned it to the congregation and invited anyone who had this problem to come forward and receive prayer. This lady had done so, a couple of people had prayed for her, and her eye had been spontaneously healed. She was currently attending our church Alpha course and became a Christian that week.

All I'd done was tell someone a message that took me 10 seconds. I'd gone and had a cup of coffee after the service and forgotten all about it. All the leader had done is exercise a small bit of faith to share it, and then two people had prayed a prayer. But for each of us our small gift had been multiplied by God and changed a person's life.

That, my friends, is how God works. Everything you offer matters. Everything is precious. So let's take heart, take faith to believe that the God of the 5,000 is the God of our lives too. And may He use the small things we offer Him for his glory. Amen.