

Prayer

Praise You, Jesus our Saviour, for generations of Your people have found their hope and joy in You, and You never fail us. Do a fresh work in our midst, we pray; renew Your people, empower them for the work of the Kingdom, and energise them for action. May we face everything with the hope and joy that comes from Your presence and favour. We ask this in Your Name, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Fire services

Pray about any recent incidents involving fire in your neighbourhood; check this out in the local press. Pray for the fire services, and pray for the victims and the scars they bear.

On-going prayers

- Give thanks for new life, and God's gift of children to parents
- Pray about Pakistan and its internal war against the Taleban
- Ask God to stir up industrial leaders to clean up their industries

Meditation

I offer myself to the only God, to Him who saved me.

Few will understand the blind obedience

This daily sacrifice requires –

Or that it gives me life, or that it gives me purpose,

Or that it makes me whole to know

That He can use the simple 'me', and millions more besides,

To do His work of 'saving grace' within a fallen world.

For most, obedience is a chain around the neck,

A symbol of religion's worst oppression

Imposed upon the lives of those who need their freedom.

But I have found that talking to my God in prayer,

And trusting Him with every simple moment

Moves a mountain of oppression from my soul.

The only liberation worth the name, to me,

Is one that sets me free to know

That nothing I can ever do will be in vain

When crafted by my God into His master plan

By which the world will find its destiny in Him -

And I will find my home.

Bible Study - Matthew 14:13-21

¹³ When Jesus heard about this, he went away from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself; but when the crowds heard about it, they followed him on foot from the towns, ¹⁴ so when he disembarked, He saw a very large crowd. He felt deeply for them and healed their sick.

¹⁵ When it became late, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a remote place, and the time has passed. Send the crowds away so that they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.'¹⁶ Jesus replied, 'They do not need to go; give them something to eat yourselves.'¹⁷ But they said to him, 'We don't have anything except five loaves and two fish.'¹⁸ So he said, 'Bring them here to me.'¹⁹ Then he instructed the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and two fish, He looked up to heaven, blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, who gave them to the crowds.

²⁰ Everyone ate and was satisfied, and they took up twelve full baskets of scraps. ²¹ Now, about five thousand men ate, as well as women and children.

Review

The story of Jesus' feeding of five thousand men together with their women and children is a remarkable story of Jesus' compassion and care for the people who followed Him and sought Him out. It is a relatively well known story, and for years, Christians have been fascinated by a number of key aspects to the story; Jesus' compassion when he wanted to be alone (14:13,14), the meaning of the 'five loaves and two fish' (14:17-19), how the miracle happened (14:19,20), and the meaning of the twelve full baskets of leftovers (14:21).

This miracle was not an isolated incident that just happened at that moment; in Matthew's Gospel, it fits into a pattern of events in Jesus' ministry. In chapter 13, Jesus made a distinction between 'the crowds' and 'the disciples' by declaring that He would only speak to the crowds in parables, but He would explain the 'secrets of the Kingdom' to the disciples (see 13:11,34). We might have the impression from chapter 13 that although the crowds were clearly interested in Jesus, they had no personal commitment to Him and were no longer of any importance to Him. What this miracle shows is that whilst Jesus had clearly begun to draw the disciples aside and give them privileged teaching (as in chapter 13), the crowds of ordinary people were still of great concern to Jesus and He continued to care for them and exercise a significant ministry to them. We need to remember that this ministry was different to that which He exercised to His disciples.

It is quite common today for people to read the story and then go on to discuss not so much the details of the story, which appear relatively simple, but the nature of miracles themselves. All manner of theories have been presented to explain what happened. The famous doctor, organist, missionary and theologian Albert Schweitzer famously argued that everyone received a small pinch of the bread and fish, similar to what happens when we share bread and wine at communion. The other most common explanation is this; people had brought food but kept it to themselves, so when Jesus and the disciples shared, everyone else then brought out their 'lunch boxes' and shared what they all had brought, sharing with each other what they were previously unwilling to share. People imagine that this is a relatively recent explanation, but it has been 'doing the rounds' since Victorian times!

It is tragic when Christian people cannot accept that something miraculous happened on this occasion. The faith of the whole church rests upon the greatest miracle possible, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ by means of God's intervention in the world and His saving grace! It is also sad if people simply read this story in Matthew's Gospel without appreciating its full context; this miracle continues a sequence of amazing works of Jesus, the healing of the man with a withered arm (12:9-14) and the raising to life of a young girl who had died (9:18-26), and many more. These miracles served a purpose in their day, which was to show people that Jesus was doing the work of God's Messiah, and the

Final Prayer

You have led us through this day, O Lord. You have led us through things we knew about and through experiences we did not know were coming, and You have been there for us all the time. Forgive us for if we have doubted You or ignored Your presence, and give us joy again when we return to You. We ask this through Jesus Christ. AMEN

Application

Two things come to mind amongst the many things that we might reflect upon from such a powerful story in scripture. Firstly, what sort of disciples are we? Are we prepared to be those who 'get on with the job' and do the work of ministry to which Jesus has called us? Alternatively, are we like the disciples in the beginning of the story, feeling that we have to refer to Jesus before we can understand what is going on, let alone 'do' anything for the Kingdom of God? I do believe that it is God's purpose for us to be the former, and act as ones who have been taught by scripture and led through prayer to get on with doing the things of God. We need to be those who do God's will in this world actively with confidence, because we have received His commission. This does not mean that we do not need to refer to Him when necessary, but we are not to act in such a dependent manner that we fail to display maturity in faith.

Secondly, the miraculous sign happened because our Lord saw the needs of people, and responded with compassion. It is too easy for Christian people to be judgemental of others in the world, and pass by the problems of society we see all around us. Jesus saw the real needs of people in his day and He does so now, longing for us to see what he sees; thousands of millions of people who are lost and searching, or starving and needing active help in a hostile and often violent world, whether physically, spiritually or emotionally. All this sounds very unfashionable and unoriginal, but I find no other explanation of the world in which we are living which is either true to my experience, or consistent with the history of humanity.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Have you heard different 'explanations' of this miracle? What are they, and what do you think of them?
2. What other passages of scripture, such as stories of feeding or stories of meals, does this passage remind you of?
3. In what ways are you 'fed' by the grace of Almighty God? Have you experienced a miracle which has sustained your life? Share this.

Discipleship

Personal comment:

It should be expected that we experience miracles on the path of discipleship as they are a sign to us and to others of the love and blessing of God. This is certainly what I have found in my own life. I have experienced miracles within the context of my own ministry, and sometimes they have only been apparent after the event as people have reflected upon what has happened. If we expect the Lord to act because He loves us, it opens the door to a great deal.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Sometimes we find ourselves in the middle of circumstances that cannot be explained rationally. Nevertheless, this is life. Try to look out for the blessings of God in the unexplainable during the next few days and see what occurs.*
- *Pray and fast for those people who find it difficult to appreciate that God loves them and wants to help them and save them. You may know some, and feel that it is your duty to pray for them regularly.*

reports of what He did still tell us that Jesus was God's Son. Thirdly, by concentrating on the miraculous aspects of the story we completely miss the purpose of it; for it is a great sign of the Kingdom of God. It does not take too much to realise that nothing is said here about what happened to make five loaves and two fish sufficient to satisfy many more than five thousand people, and generate 12 full baskets of leftovers. This is about God's provision for people who cannot feed themselves!

The whole passage directs us to ask many questions about Jesus and about what took place, but if we simply question whether it was a miracle, we will miss the more important questions we should ask. Why did this happen, and what did it symbolise? For whom was it done and why? What made Jesus stop running from the crowds, teach them, and deal with the consequences in this way? We will now look deeper at the story.

Going Deeper

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- The beginning of the story: where did Jesus go, and why?
- Why was Jesus concerned for the crowds?
- What was going on before the miracle took place?
- The miracles of feeding found in the Bible
- A meal of significance for the future!

Notes on the text and translation

V14 *'when He disembarked ...'* The Greek is not entirely clear. It says 'when he went out ...' It is possible that this refers to Him 'going out' from the (deserted) place He had set out to reach, at some later time (see previous verse). The story makes more sense if we translate it as if things happened more quickly, and Jesus was faced by the needy crowd as soon as he got off the boat, never having reached His goal!

V15 *'when it became late ... and the time has passed'* This is a fairly literal translation. Many Bible versions use some assumptions to say 'when it was evening ... it is getting late' (etc.). We need to remember that in Israel, the sun goes down relatively quickly, and the word used here simply expresses the few hours before sundown. The word 'evening' conjures up different pictures to people in different countries. By sticking closely to the basic meaning of the Greek, it is quite possible to convey what was happening.

V19 *'he instructed the crowds'* Most Bible versions have 'He ordered the crowds.' It is true that the Greek means 'to give an order', but I am not convinced that the Greek wants us to think that Jesus was doing anything more than directing people

V19 *'and gave them to the disciples, who gave them to the crowds'* Strictly, this reads, 'gave them to the disciples and the disciples gave them to the crowds'. In Greek, 'the disciples' is repeated, perhaps to emphasise their role in the drama. However, the repeat is completely irrelevant in English and adds nothing to our understanding of the story.

Going Deeper

The beginning of the story: where did Jesus go and why?

The beginning of the story presents something of a quandary, as Matthew reports 'when Jesus heard about this ...' (v13), but to what was he referring? Remember, the immediately previous story of the beheading of John the Baptist was told in Matthew's story as a 'recap' or 'flashback' story to explain Herod's belief that Jesus was John the Baptist,

raised to life. You may have to read the first three verses of chapter 14 again to make sure you see that this is indeed what is happening. As the Gospel now moves out of the 'flashback' story, the comment 'when Jesus heard what happened' refers not to the story of John's beheading, but to the fact that Herod was probably on the lookout for Jesus (for the reasons given in 14:1-2)!

The most commonly held belief is that verse 13 describes Jesus' move out of the region of Galilee governed by Herod, because he wanted to avoid unwanted attention from him (see yesterday's study). He moved to the other side of lake Galilee which was governed by Philip, who was not as keenly interested in attempting to imprison Jesus. It was also a barren or 'desert' region (14:13), similar to where Jesus went when He had been taken into the wilderness by the Spirit to be tempted by Satan to 'make bread out of stones' (4:3)! Today's story tells us a true story of Jesus' miraculous provision of food, but it is not done to please either the devil, or Jesus' personal motives as Messiah. It is done out of pure love and compassion (14:14)

Why was Jesus concerned for the crowds?

The crowds followed Jesus into this wilderness, and this time, Jesus was not alone, as He had been before when taken there by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil (4:1,2) at the beginning of His ministry. His response to the crowds was one of compassion, with the Greek word 'splangnidsomai' expressing the very deepest of heartfelt feelings (14:14). The similar passage in other Gospels (Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17, John 6:1-14) describe Jesus as seeing the crowd as 'like a sheep without a shepherd', and consequently 'teaching them'. Matthew gives no reason for Jesus feelings, which makes this all the more remarkable; Matthew gives us the impression Jesus is deeply moved by seeing them, simply for who they are.

This is amplified by Jesus' response; He 'healed their sick' (14:14). On every occasion Matthew refers to Jesus being 'deeply moved' emotionally, He proceeds to heal either someone or a number of people (4:23-24, 8:16, 9:35, 12:15 etc.). Even if the crowds were not to be the recipients of Jesus' teaching concerning the Kingdom of Heaven any more (13:10-17), He still ministered to them according to their need, and their need was for healing. They came to Jesus as needy people who still needed to see evidence of the Messiah at work in their midst, and He put aside His own need for peace and quiet in order to meet their needs, even if it was repeating what He had done before (see chapters 8,9).

It is also worth mentioning that the 'desert' place was also a reminder to Israelite people of the days of their own history when Moses had led the people through the wilderness and God had miraculously provided 'manna' for them to eat! The Messiah was just about to do the same!

What was going on before the miracle took place?

It appears in verse 15 that the disciples were trying to protect Jesus from the crowds, so that He could gain the peace He sought. They strongly expressed their belief that time was late and people should make their own way home to prepare food and eat whilst it was still light enough so to do. But Jesus ignored the comments of the disciples and then placed the burden for the problem upon the disciples themselves; 'give them something to eat yourselves (14:16)!

We can only see what is going on with hindsight, as did Matthew who recorded this for us. Jesus was drawing the disciples into the place where they would take responsibility themselves for what was happening around them, and not simply ask Jesus to deal with everything whilst they watched. We recall that in the Old Testament, there came a time when Moses, at the suggestion of Jethro his father-in-law, appointed 'elders' to assist him

because of the sheer numbers of people needing his help (Ex 18:12-24). Moses then had to teach these people what to do to govern the people. Now, Jesus was about to commission the disciples for their special task of leadership, and He had already begun to teach them 'what to do'. Here in the situation represented in this story, He needed the disciples to begin to show the initiative and intelligence in the way that they assisted Him, and not simply go back to Him all the time.

The miracles of feeding found in the Bible

Many attempts have been made to try to find significance in almost every part of the story of the 'feeding of the five thousand', starting with the five loaves and the two fish. Note that this is the same number of loaves and fish as in the other Gospel accounts, but there is another 'feeding of the four thousand' in Matthew, 15:32-39 with seven loaves and 'a few' fish! However no-one has come up with any explanation for these numbers; this is not where we should look for the meaning of this event.

Probably the most helpful way of understanding this miracle is this. It completes a sequence of great Biblical stories in which God feeds His people, and this miracle is the climax of all these great stories. In Exodus 16, God had provided His people with 'manna' from heaven; it was a miraculous provision of Almighty God to both feed the people, and also show them that God cared for them and would indeed deliver them, and lead them through the wilderness to the 'Promised Land'. The first of the great prophets, Elijah, miraculously fed a widow and her son during a period of drought, demonstrating that God, through Elijah, was in control of the destiny of His people, not the worshippers of Ba'al with whom he later fought on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 17:8-16 and following). Elijah's servant Elisha fed a hundred people with 20 loaves of barley (2K 4:1-4) to demonstrate God's authority in a difficult situation. Now Jesus performed an even greater miracle of 'feeding', which, if the people knew their history, should point them to Himself as the Messiah, God's chosen one who came after Elijah!

A meal of significance for the future!

Doing the miraculous was no longer the 'temptation' that it was for Jesus when He first went into the desert. He knew that He was not doing this for 'publicity', and although the crowd still needed to see that He was indeed the Messiah, He had nothing to prove to Himself. So Jesus fed the people in an extraordinary way. He treated it like many a meal amongst a group of friends; He 'took' the bread, 'blessed' it, 'broke' the bread, and then 'gave' it out to the people (14:19). We are all now familiar with these actions from the 'breaking of bread' (the Eucharistic meal, communion, or 'Lord's Supper') which Christians share as a celebration of Jesus' death and life. As Jesus did this, He 'looked up to heaven' (14:19), as if to offer everything to His Father. Jesus may have decided not to teach them the 'secrets of the Kingdom', but He was certainly going to continue His ministry of compassionate healing and miraculous signs, so that they might still perceive that He was the Messiah.

Jesus ministered to people as they needed, and His ministry on this occasion was twofold, to the crowds so that some might see His glory as the Messiah, and to the disciples so that they would share His ministry. The disciples had indeed taken the bread from Jesus and then passed it on; a small detail, but one that indicates their 'taking part' in the ministry of Jesus to which they were called. The disciples also served by picking up the 'twelve full baskets of leftovers, and this was a sign to them of the complete work of God through Jesus in which they now shared. Earlier, they had begun to take part on Jesus' ministry when they went out on mission, to do what they had seen Jesus do (Matthew 10f.); but on this occasion, the model of learning Jesus used with the disciples was more like mentoring.