

8:1-10) where seven loaves alone were used. We will look at the difference between the two stories and their purpose within the Gospels when we study the passage in Mark 8:1-10.

All the numbers used in the story have significance, though some more so than others. The number of loaves and fish show how small a resource Jesus could work with to achieve great results, the number of men present (a standard way of counting people in those days) indicates the sheer number of people Jesus could touch with His ministry, and the number of baskets left over showed the sufficiency of the Lord's provision for all His people, with the twelve baskets indicating the twelve tribes of God's people. Many people like to try and work out how such a miracle could take place, with theories varying from the sharing of food already available, to the idea that just like a 'Eucharist' or 'communion' today, everyone only had a small taste, but was satisfied (6:42) because through this 'meal', they perceived that Jesus was the Messiah. However, as with all the miracles and works of power in Mark, we can only work with what we have, which is a story of a miracle which does not fit our idea of 'reality', but which is capable of pointing forward to the spiritual truth of God which is found in Jesus Christ.

### Application

One of the strong connections we have with this passage of Scripture today comes from what Jesus did with the bread. He blessed the bread (which is what is meant by Jesus' 'looking up to heaven' to present the offering to God - see 6:41), broke it and shared it (6:41, a sequence of actions which He later performed at His last meal with His disciples (14:22-24). It also looks forward to the meals Jesus had with His disciples after the resurrection (Luke 24:13-35, John 21:9-14), and the meals which early Christians shared specifically to remember Jesus (1 Cor 11:23-26). Different churches have settled into different ways of eating a meal in remembrance of Christ in celebration of His life, death and resurrection, but there is no doubt that this meal has been a powerful part of Christian worship for two thousand years. According to a letter sent to Emperor Trajan by a Roman governor called Pliny at the turn of the first Century, eating the communion meal was one of the first 'charges' brought against Christians by the Roman authorities, who regarded it as a form of cannibalism! The communion meal has almost always been a part of Christian worship, and will continue to be so.

Also, we should not forget that the idea of 'saying grace' lies behind sharing food, and it helps us recognise that God is present with us when we eat. 'Grace' is a prayer which invites Christ to be the guest at every meal, and it's purpose is to offer thanks to God for food and to bless it. Lastly, it is increasingly the practice of church house groups and evangelistic endeavours to share food as part of more general Christian fellowship. In a way we find hard to express, there is something special about eating food together, and when we allow our Lord to be with us in this, He can bless us abundantly.

### Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss what the disciples learned about leadership in this text
2. What were the reasons why Jesus turned His interest from the disciples to the crowds in this passage of Scripture?
3. Imagine you were present at the first feeding of the five thousand. Discuss what you would make of the event and what it would mean to you.

### Discipleship

Consider the problems that there are in the world today with food and with eating. There are huge debates about the way food is produced, from vegetables to dairy products to meat and fish. You may have some strong opinions about these. Given the strong connections in the Bible between faith and food, make it your aim to place your opinions and feelings about food issues before God and pray about them. Ask the Lord to help You decide what is the best way to witness to your faith by eating well and responsibly, for yourself and society.

### Final Prayer

Save us, Lord God, from becoming so wrapped up in ourselves that we do not appreciate Your work throughout the world, and the many different people and situations You have to involve Yourself with. Lord, You know best, but be merciful to each one of us, and help us to see how it is that what happens to us can be a part of Your plans for Your Kingdom. AMEN

### Prayer

Forgive, Lord Jesus, the limitations of our humanity. We are easily tempted to follow the example of those who speak the loudest through music, television or film, instead of those who live by the power of Your Spirit. Give us the grace to confess our faults and accept Your guidance. Bless us we pray as we seek to do what is right; AMEN

### Other Prayer Suggestions

#### Weekly Theme: Christ and Culture

Pray about the way your church celebrates the Christian festivals, and how they are treated by your own country. Ask the Lord to help His people witness to their faith through these festivals.

- Advent and Christmas
- Lent and Easter
- The Ascension and Pentecost
- Harvest Festivals

### Meditation

Let us take the Lord's hardest challenges, and put them into action.

Repent before the Lord your God, and abandon all that's unworthy.

Love the unlovely wherever they are, and embrace what the world rejects

Forgive all those who have hurt you badly, and deny the devil his chance.

Listen to one another in Christ, and seek the best for others.

Embrace the empowering of the Holy Spirit, and follow His lead all the time.

Speak only such words as are honouring to God, and pass on the truth of the Word.

Discover that 'faith' is as natural as breathing, and never be ashamed of your Maker.

### Bible Study - Mark 6:30-46

<sup>30</sup> The apostles gathered around Jesus and told Him about everything they had been able to do and teach. <sup>31</sup> Because many people were coming and going and they did not have time even to eat a meal, Jesus said to them, 'Come away with me by yourselves to somewhere which is quiet, and rest for a while.' <sup>32</sup> So they went away in the boat to a quiet place by themselves. <sup>33</sup> But people saw them leaving and recognised them, so from every town people ran on foot and arrived there before them! <sup>34</sup> When Jesus got out of the boat and saw the vast crowd, He felt great compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and He began to teach them many things.

<sup>35</sup> By now, time was moving on, and the disciples came and said to Him, 'This is a remote place, and it is already very late. <sup>36</sup> Send them away to go to the surrounding farms and villages to buy themselves something to eat.' <sup>37</sup> But He said to them, 'You give them something to eat!' They replied, 'Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?' <sup>38</sup> 'How many loaves do you have?' He asked. 'Go and see.' When they had found out, they told Him, 'Five - and two fish!' <sup>39</sup> So Jesus instructed them all to sit down on the green grass in groups. <sup>40</sup> So they sat in groups of a hundred and of fifty. <sup>41</sup> Then, taking the five loaves and the two fish, He looked up to heaven, gave thanks and broke the loaves. He gave them to His disciples to distribute amongst the people, and He also divided up the two fish between them all. <sup>42</sup> They all ate and had sufficient, <sup>43</sup> and they collected twelve baskets full of what was left over of the bread and the fish. <sup>44</sup> Those who ate the loaves were five thousand men. <sup>45</sup> He insisted straight away that the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of Him to Bethsaida, while He dismissed the crowd. <sup>46</sup> After He parted company with the crowd, he went up onto the hillside to pray.

### Review

What an extraordinary set of incidents! Jesus and the disciples attempted to discuss what happened on their mission (6:30), but their conversation was so interrupted by other people that

Jesus instructed the disciples to 'come away with me', moreover, they had not been able to eat (6:31)! Then, they failed to get away from the crowds, who ran along the seashore and outpaced the boat containing Jesus and the disciples! Something then seems to have changed in Jesus, for instead of giving the disciples the attention He earlier promised, He responded to the crowd instead (6:34). It was after this that the circumstances came together for the miracle of the 'feeding of the five thousand'. After everyone went home and He had sent the disciples away in the boat, Jesus then escaped from everyone and 'went up on the hillside to pray'.

The whole sequence of events must have been very confusing for the disciples. It was important for them to have time with Jesus to 'debrief' after their mission (6:7-11). Mark reports that they successfully did what was asked of them (6:12,13); preaching, casting out demons, anointing with oil and healing people. But if you have done any of these things, you will know how important it is to 'unwind' afterwards, and initially, Jesus seems to have wanted them to talk with Him and have a well earned rest (6:31). Once Jesus was focussed on the crowds however, the disciples ended up doing something they had not done before, which was to act as servants. In the feeding of the five thousand (6:35-46), the disciples no longer merely followed Jesus around and listened to Him, they had to help Him, ending up by gathering up the left-over baskets of bread and fish (6:43). This was a powerful and possibly hard lesson after the mission they had conducted in which they had exercised so much authority; and then at the end, Jesus left them on their own and went on His way to pray. Clearly, the disciples had to learn some hard lessons about the kind of leadership they had to exercise in the Kingdom of God. It was not just a leadership of power, but of humble service.

Leadership was the issue which caught Jesus' attention at the point in the story where He turned His attention away from the disciples and towards the people and the crowds again. Mark reports in verse 34; 'He felt great compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd ...' Jesus looked at the crowds and saw large numbers of His own people, Jews who lived in their own lands with the freedom to worship God as they chose (albeit within the Roman Empire), but who were spiritually leaderless. They were so desperate for what Jesus offered them that they ran around the side of the sea of Galilee whilst He travelled by boat (6:33). These people were in search of their Messiah.

In the amazing story of the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus demonstrated to the crowds that He was their Messiah, and the source of their spiritual nourishment. Just as God had provided manna as food for the people of Israel in the desert centuries before during the Exodus (Exodus 16), so God now met His people's needs through Jesus, the Messiah; providing them with bread when they were out in the fields, caught out by the end of the day. Nearly every feature of this miracle points either backwards to what God had done before for His people, or forwards to the Messianic banquet at which people believed that God would conclude history. In the days of the early church, Christians saw this miracle as an indication of the 'eucharistic feast', the celebration of Christ's death through the sharing of bread and wine. More than in any other story of Mark so far, we meet Jesus here as the Messiah, performing a miracle large enough for all who were willing or able to come to Him.

### Going Deeper

Many scholars have questioned this whole set of stories, unconvinced about how they could have taken place. We cannot go back and find all the details of what happened to satisfy our curiosity, but Mark clearly saw this miracle as incredibly important. In his Gospel it stands out as very different from anything Jesus had done in His ministry before. Every detail of the miracle had great meaning for him, and it is our job to look further and understand why.

#### **Jesus, the disciples and the crowd.**

Everything in verses 30 to 34 is placed there by Mark to explain the transition from Jesus' post-mission meeting with the disciples to the setting for the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. It is easy to see how this happened. Jesus and the disciples were not able to get the peace and quiet they needed, they tried to escape by going to a 'quiet' place, and were pursued by the crowds. When Jesus finally met the crowds again His heart went out to them (6:34), and the miracle followed. But what is not clear in any translation is that the Greek word which is translated 'quiet place' (6:31), also means 'deserted place', and is related to the word used in the Old and New Testaments for 'desert' or 'wilderness'. The imagery would not have been lost on early readers of Mark's Gospel. In the Old Testament, God's people were formed into a nation by being led out of Egypt into a desert by Moses. There, with Moses as their

leader, God taught them, fed them and met with them. This is reflected in our passage, for Jesus taught the people while they were in this 'deserted' place (6:34) and went on to feed them (6:35-46). In tomorrow's passage the disciples encounter Jesus as God's Messiah, walking on the water (6:47-56), and this completes the revelation!

Although this is clearly Mark's intention, the details of the passage still count, and whilst the other main theme of leadership is also being developed (see above), there are other important issues. The first of these is 'rest'. Even though Jesus did not manage to take the disciples away for a brief rest (6:31), it was His intention; there are times when Jesus does intend His people to have rest from their ministry. It is easy to give the impression that the Christian call is one of unending intensity in which there is no escape from the on-going demands of the Kingdom of God. Every servant of the Lord should remember that the first command of God in the Bible is that all people should take one day of rest per week (Genesis 2:1-3 and Exodus 20:8-11); and in addition, this passage shows that Jesus was obviously sensitive to the disciple's need for recreational rest even though it was not achieved at that time.

Earlier, I highlighted the way Jesus responded to the crowd and the significance of the well known phrase 'they were like sheep without a shepherd' (6:34). We cannot escape the fact that this imagery is typical of the relationship of the people of Israel and their leaders. Many times over, the Old Testament talks about priests, kings or prophets as 'shepherds of the sheep' (Isaiah 63:11, Jer. 3:11, 12:10, Ezekiel 34:2f. etc.), and most notably, in David's great Psalm (23) where it says 'The Lord is my Shepherd ...' Coming from the mouth of a King of Israel and Judah, what David said was important; God was the true 'shepherd of Israel'. This whole theme is taken further by John in his Gospel (John 10:2f.).

It is at this point that Jesus appears to accept His responsibility for the crowds. Earlier in Mark, Jesus appears to have had a cautious relationship with the crowds who followed Him (e.g. 1:35-39), but in this passage He accepts them and they follow Him. Instead of the clamour, they all do what He tells them (1:39), and at the very end, Jesus dismisses the people happily and peacefully, sending the disciples on ahead (6:45,46). Things were changing.

#### **The feeding of the five thousand**

In the late evening, all were gathered in the deserted countryside, but Jesus accepted responsibility for the people. He would provide for the physical needs of all those who followed Him; in this case, by giving them food. By feeding people as He did, Jesus confirmed what people observed about Him, that He was God's Messiah, the one who was expected to fulfil 'the law and the prophets' (see Matt 5:17). Why would the people believe this? Firstly, everyone knew that during the Exodus, God had fed His people in the desert (see above) just before the famous giving of the Law in Exodus 20. Now if this miracle connects Jesus with the giving of the Law, how does it connect with the prophets? It does so through Elijah and Elisha. It has often been noticed that Elijah, one of the greatest of the Old Testament prophets performed a number of miracles, including feeding a widow at a time of drought (1 Kings 17:8-16), but it was his pupil, Elisha who went even further. He fed one hundred men with twenty loaves of barley (2 King 4:32f.). Although this is not as spectacular as Jesus' feat, it confirms a firm link between Jesus' miracle and the prophetic traditions of the Old Testament.

As we read the story, strangely, it is the disciples who we most easily identify with. They misunderstood what Jesus was doing and what He was asking of them. This is because they saw the situation in a profoundly practical way. They felt that the shortage of provision in a lonely place meant that the best thing was to send people out into the surrounding farms and villages to obtain what food they could. The words 'it is very late' (6:35) and other indications in the Greek from the earlier verses suggest that the day was drawing to a close, and readers today who live some way north of Israel will not necessarily realise that in lands further south, night draws in more quickly than is our experience. Jesus' response to the disciples was a little sharp, but reflected the fact that as they had just been on mission and had the authority to do works of power in His name, they should be able to deal with the situation. However, they could not understand Jesus, and had to hand back the situation to Him (6:38).

Jesus told the disciples to gather the available resources, the five loaves and two fish. What is interesting is that this story is one of very few which are told in each Gospel (Matt 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17 and John 6:1-14) and in every one of these accounts, the details of five loaves and two fish are, fortunately, the same. The event is sometimes confused with a second and different event at which Jesus fed four thousand people (Matt 15:32-39 and Mark