

Bread of Life

One of Jesus' most famous miracles is the feeding of the five thousand. It stuck deeply in the minds of all who saw it. It is recorded in all four gospels. Here is John's account:

Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick. Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. The Jewish Passover Festival was near.

When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

Philip answered him, "It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"

Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"

Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.¹

Notice the details which suggest eye-witness recollection of detail, such as the connection between the timing (Passover time - roughly our Easter) and the abundance of grass, which is what you'd expect in that season in the

Middle East. Here, in this remarkable episode, Jesus takes five loaves and two fish and with them feeds this vast crowd - so well, that there are twelve basketfuls left over.

But what's the relevance of the story to us? Is it there just to make us say "Wow"? The good news is that we don't need to guess, for John shows us, in the conversations which follow the miracle (in chapter 6 of his gospel). Plenty know the story; far fewer the vital truths Jesus wanted us to learn from what he did.

The feeding is about who Jesus is

After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world."²

Naturally, the first thing the crowd were wondering about was the true identity of the man who'd been able to do such a work of creation. I remember reading how an Australian test cricketer played once in an English village game. Anyone who didn't already recognise him would have asked, as they watched him play, "Who on earth is this guy?"

No wonder this matter of who exactly Jesus is was top in the minds of the people who saw this miracle. It is surely the obvious question. Who could possess such authority as to be able to do what only the Creator can do?

When the people there spoke about *the Prophet who is to come into the world*, they were referring to an ancient prediction, from Moses, of a great prophet who would one day come and speak God's words. And it is hard not to agree that Jesus fits the bill.

But in John's gospel as a whole, we are encouraged to go further. For at the end of his account of Jesus' life, John shows the

¹ John 6:1-13

² John 6:14

conclusion he wants his readers to draw from the miracles:

*Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*³

John calls the miracles *signs* because they are pointers - to Jesus' identity. His conclusion, after recording the turning of water into wine, the healing of a nobleman's son (at a distance), the cure of a quadriplegic, the feeding of the five thousand, the walking on the water, the giving of sight to a man born blind, the raising of Lazarus from the dead and Jesus' own bodily resurrection (not to mention his fulfilment of prophecy), is that he is none other than the Son of God himself. He is, as John has said at the beginning, *the Word, who is with God and is God,*⁴ *who became flesh,*⁵ who came into our world as one of us.

One of the striking things about John's gospel is the way he presents the reader with evidence. He uses words like *seen, witness, testimony* and *verdict*: the language of the law-court. John has become persuaded that the man he and others met with for those three years in Palestine is no less than the very Son of God, who came into our world, and he wants to show the reader the rational grounds on which he has reached that verdict. There is no leap in the dark here!

This is part of what the feeding means: it points to the true identity of the Feeder.

The feeding is about the new life that Jesus offers

*Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."*⁶

It's the next day, and the people who experienced Jesus have chased him across the Sea of Galilee. They are on to something, with someone who can feed them for nothing! As he talks to them, he tells them he has something better for them: *"Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."*⁷

What does Jesus mean? *Eternal life* is a new quality of life in which we know God personally.⁸ It is being reconciled to the God with whom, naturally, we are distant. It means experiencing friendship with the one who made us, and having access to him in prayer. It is knowing the joy of sins forgiven. It is being able to call God *Father*.

Truly this is nourishment that will never leave us unsatisfied! For God made us to know him. As the great theologian Augustine, back in the fourth century, expressed it, *You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.*⁹ Countless people all down the centuries, from very different cultures, testify that they, too, have found true and deepest satisfaction in Christ.

Do you see what Jesus is doing here? He is making a bigger point from the miracle. He is likening himself to the bread which had

³ John 20:30-31

⁴ John 1:1

⁵ John 1:14

⁶ John 6:35

⁷ John 6:27

⁸ John 17:3

⁹ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, 1.1

brought them nourishment. Here were people who'd been hungry and become satisfied by his feeding of them. They wanted more of the same. But in fact, he can give them something much more satisfying: friendship with God himself. This is what they should seek.

And so should we!

The feeding is about new life which lasts for ever

*"I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live for ever."*¹⁰

Jesus tells us more of why this food he offers is so worth seeking: it is the answer to death itself. He compares what he can provide with Moses' feeding of the Israelites with manna, 1400 years earlier. That was a great provision, but only temporary in its results: those who ate it all eventually died. Jesus, by contrast, claims to be able to feed us in a way that lasts forever.

We all live under sentence of death. As it draws closer, we feel its chill shade and wonder what, if anything, lies beyond. We are drained of hope, troubled and fearful - and rightly so. For it is God who has put us under sentence of death. But Jesus here claims to be the answer. Here is the hope of heaven! Here is everlasting life; here is a man or woman now brought into a friendship which can never, ever be dissolved, with the very God who made them.

This might sound very far-fetched: how could anyone conquer death? But there again, how could anyone feed five thousand with a few loaves and fish? Here again is the point of

the miracle. When the claim to conquer death comes from one who can do the work of creation itself, we should take it with the utmost seriousness.

As a minister, I have had to take the funerals both of those who have trusted Christ and those who didn't. I cannot help observing the difference in atmosphere. At the funeral of a non-Christian, grief (and sometimes sad resignation) overwhelms. For a Christian there is grief and yet, also, a solid hope.

The feeding is about how Jesus brings this new life

*"This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."*¹¹

Jesus' hearers must at this point have wondered what on earth he meant. Giving his flesh? And somehow, through this, providing life for the world?

The reader of the whole of John's gospel, however, knows the rest of the story: how Jesus was nailed to a Roman cross, and how his death was no mere martyrdom, but God's planned means for our salvation.

For he died that we might be forgiven; he laid down his own life for us, the Suffering Servant promised from centuries before.¹² The punishment that brought us peace was upon him. By his wounds we are healed. He gave his life, that we might have life.

At Auschwitz in 1941 a Pole, Francis Gajowiczek, was sentenced to be starved to death in a windowless bunker. In despair, he cried out, "My wife! My children! I will never see them again!" Another Pole, Max Kolbe, hearing him, stepped out from the ranks and offered to take his place: he had no family to worry about. The commandant agreed, and in two weeks Kolbe was dead. Gajowiczek

¹⁰ John 6:48-50

¹¹ John 6:51

¹² Isaiah 53

lived and was restored to his family.¹³ Kolbe had died, that Gajowiniczek could live.

Here Jesus is speaking about his own death in a similar way. He is picking up the idea of the giving out of the bread - in the same way, he was to give himself. Again, we see the meaning of the miracle.

This was such news to me when I first understood it. I came to realise that real Christianity is not about what we do for God but for what he has done for us, supremely in the self-giving of his only Son, giving his own flesh for the life of the world.

The feeding is about how we can have this new life for ourselves

*Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day."*¹⁴

These are shocking words: eating his flesh and drinking his blood? Yet he is continuing to unpack the meaning of the feeding. His point here is that, just as bread is to be eaten, he is to be received into our lives. Food is for eating!

How are we to respond to Jesus? It's easy to admire him, or simply see him as an example to be followed. He certainly is to be admired; he certainly is an example. But by using this picture of eating him, he is taking us a step further. He wants us to receive him. I am the bread of life, he has just said.

This is possible because of the rest of the story. The same Jesus who was crucified rose from the dead, and comes by his Spirit to live in the lives of all who will receive him. All we need to do is to pray to him, asking him to come in, and he will. And the shape of the Christian life is of on-going dependence on him, just as we do with ordinary food.

This is very personal. I forget which Victorian Prime Minister it was who said, "Things are come to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to interfere with the private life of a man!" But Jesus really wants us to understand this. So much so, that he has given us a visual aid to ram the point home: the eating of bread and drinking of wine in what we call the Lord's Supper.

Conclusion

Do you see, then, the meaning of the miracle? Here is the Son of God, able to do what only the Creator can. He makes the feeding of the crowd a picture of a deeper way he can feed us - with himself. The miracle of the feeding points to a bigger miracle: bringing us eternal life, the knowledge of God now and for ever, conquering death. As he gives out the bread, it points to his own giving of himself for us, on the cross. And he pushes home with much force the point that, just as we eat bread, we must receive him into our lives. This is how we can have this life for ourselves.

How will you respond to this? As we reach the end of John 6, we find Jesus' hearers polarised. Many reject him - his teaching about having to receive him as if we were eating him seemed just too much. But his disciples realised that these surprising words - explaining the feeding - were in fact *the words of eternal life*.¹⁵ And so they are: understanding the meaning of this miracle is the key to life at its best, life for ever.

May you discover, and eat, and be nourished by the bread of life!

Alasdair Paine

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¹³ D C M Fletcher, *The Best News in the World*

¹⁴ John 6:53-54

¹⁵ John 6:68