

therefore to the institution of the act of Communion that became central in the Church's worship. "I am the bread of life ... Whoever eats this bread will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world' ... '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" (John 6:48, 51b, 53).

This is the primary lesson to be drawn from this miracle. Jesus is the One who provides true life, both physical and spiritual, and all the everyday necessities of life! And his provision is superabundant – far more than the minimum needed. Everyone's appetite was *fully* satisfied. Five loaves and two fish indeed fed far in excess of 5,000 people. And, to emphasise God's abounding provision, the disciples picked up more leftovers than the ingredients they started with – which were no doubt used to feed them in the days to come!

Surely the crowd can't have missed the similarities to God's miraculous provision, through Moses, of the Bread of Heaven – the manna – given every day to the Israelites in the Wilderness! Yet, again, in John 6, Jesus declared himself to be not just the Moses figure, but God's lifegiving bread itself. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats *this* bread will live for ever" (John 6:51). Not only does Jesus provide the very thing that sustains life, he *is* the very thing that sustains life! And not just life for this world, but real life for all eternity!

The crowd were lost and in need of a shepherd. And Jesus, the Good Shepherd, fed them with his life-giving word on those green pastures. But he gave them more than just words, he gave them yet another demonstration of who he truly is – God the Giver and Sustainer of life, and the very essence of true life. Are we hungry for Jesus like that crowd was, or are we blasé about seeking him through his Word? The disciples were given even more: *they* were given another chance to be involved in sharing the life of Jesus with others. And I doubt that many of them felt exhausted and jaded after *this* involvement! It may not have been the original plan, but they benefitted nonetheless! What about us? Do we want the comfortable, quiet life, or the adventure of being a part of spreading the good news of Jesus Christ and witnessing what he alone can do through us? The offer is there for us too: "How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asks us. What could Jesus do with what you have to offer, if you place it in his hands?

[Pray]

then some more food. Come and get some rest! Not only is this *permitted* in the Christian life; Jesus considers it *vital* in the Christian life. But not just to rest and forget it all. No, the rest Jesus prioritises here is rest *with him*. No doubt the boat journey was partly designed to facilitate such space!

But the crowds have a very different idea! They see Jesus and his disciples go, they see the direction they are heading, and they rush along the bank to meet them when they arrive. Just imagine how exasperating it must have been for the disciples, as they came towards the shore, to see a large crowd there *again*! And it's amazing how often we can experience something similar isn't it? When I was training for ministry, we went through a period of over a year when almost every time Fiona and I planned anything special together, something would happen to prevent us from doing it. We, or one of the children would get ill, or something. And still today, when I purposefully plan into my diary rest or retreat, it's remarkable how many times something comes up to make that hard to do, either physically or emotionally, or both. I believe this is such a battleground precisely because it is so important.

But Jesus had the ability to switch modes in order to meet the immediate need before him. The disciples were clearly annoyed at the crowds being there. But Jesus had *compassion* on them, because he could see that they were lost and helpless, "like sheep without a shepherd." Since he is the Good Shepherd, he met their need first and *then* took the rest with his disciples that he had planned. If, as is possible, he had just learned of his cousin, John the Baptist's death, then his compassion is all the more remarkable! So, on those green pastures, Jesus fed the spiritually hungry crowd with the bread of his word.

However, as afternoon turned to evening, the disciples had had enough. "This is a remote place,' they said, 'and it's already very late. Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.'" It's a reasonable suggestion in and of itself. And it would also neatly get rid of the pesky crowd. But it wasn't what Jesus had in mind. I imagine he had a bit of a twinkle in his eye as he replied, "You give them something to eat." But they clearly didn't apply to this situation the lessons they'd learnt on their recent mission trip – lessons about trusting wholly in God's provision. Instead, they did what we so often do – they looked for a human solution to an impossible problem. A quick calculation. A huge crowd of thousands. That's at least 200 denarii! Or, to put it in context, more than half a year's wages! It's very doubtful they had that much disposable cash on their persons, but even if they did, did Jesus really want them to blow it all on a meal for these people, who probably had more than enough money to each buy themselves the meal they needed? It makes no sense!

I wonder, did Jesus roll his eyes, or put his head in his hands in despair, or chuckle to himself, at their slowness to catch on? Whatever his reaction, he now began to lead them towards the solution. Which started with them! "How many loaves do *you* have? Go and see." Now, Jesus could turn stones into bread if he wanted. Why did he involve the disciples? I suspect it's because the more involved they were in the miracle, the better chance they had of learning its lesson. Though, if we read on to chapter 8, they didn't learn it all that quickly!

The disciples returned to him with the pitiful means at their disposal: five loaves and two fish for five thousand men, plus women and children! Hardly worth bothering, is it? But Jesus is the Creator of the universe; he is the Bread of Life who supplies all our essential needs. When we reach the end of our inadequate earthly resources, that's when his giving can truly begin! Yet even at this stage he tested their faith and obedience. "Make all the people sit down in groups on the green grass." That's sure to create an expectation. The disciples would look really silly if nothing happened now! But this is faith – doing what Jesus asks, and trusting him to come good on his promises! Helplessness mixed with faith is the breeding ground for the miraculous, as happened here.

There are echoes of the institution of Communion at the Last Supper in the description which follows: Jesus took the loaves; he looked up to heaven and gave thanks; he broke the loaves; he handed them to the disciples – only this time it was for the people. Those echoes may be deliberate in Mark. They are certainly deliberate in Jesus' explanation that follows the equivalent account in *John's Gospel* (chapter 6). The connection there is *unmistakable* to Jesus' sacrifice and

Trinity Baptist Church

Sunday 16th May 2021

Mark 6:30-44 - Jesus the Provider of Life's Essentials

We're continuing our series in Mark's Gospel, asking ourselves the question Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" And what difference does who he is make to your life? We read today from Mark 6:30-44.

[Read Mark 6:30-44]

30The apostles gathered round Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. 31Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.'

32So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. 33But many who saw them leaving recognised them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. 34When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

35By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. 'This is a remote place,' they said, 'and it's already very late. 36Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.'

37But he answered, 'You give them something to eat.'

They said to him, 'That would take more than half a year's wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?'

38'How many loaves do you have?' he asked. 'Go and see.'

When they found out, they said, 'Five – and two fish.'

39Then Jesus told them to make all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. 40So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. 41Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. 42They all ate and were satisfied, 43and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. 44The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

[Pray]

Anyone who has been around small children for any time will know that they have an incredible capacity to report the events of their day in *great* detail, especially if they have done something they really enjoyed. And it is almost impossible to break into that flow of information until they have told you *everything* that they feel was important. Quite what happens to turn such effusive speakers into almost monosyllabic grunters in teenage years is a mystery! But that's another story.

I imagine that Jesus' disciples at the beginning of today's passage were rather like small children, excitedly reporting back not only what they had *done* on their first solo mission – healing the sick, driving out demons – but also the intricacies of what they *said* as they went from village to village preaching the good news of Jesus. I imagine this because, in my experience, that is invariably what happens when people get involved in evangelism and see positive results from it – they want to tell *everyone* about it! And it is noteworthy that Jesus makes time to *listen* to them, even though he knew in advance that they would meet with such success. This shows us something of *God's* delight to listen to our feelings, experiences and thanksgiving.

But Jesus' next words are also noteworthy: "Come with me by yourselves to a *quiet* place and *get some rest*." They were ever popular, perhaps in part because of the success of their recent mission. So popular that there wasn't even space or time to eat! And that is not, repeat *not*, a situation that Jesus considers healthy for his followers. There is something very practical and down to earth about Jesus' invitation. Much like when Elijah had burnt himself out in the triumph on Mount Carmel and God's first response to his ensuing depression in 1 Kings 19 was to give him some food, and some sleep, and