

Food, glorious Food!

[Isaiah 55: 1-5.](#) [Matthew 14: 13-21](#)

What's your idea of a perfect meal? A chippy tea looking over the water at Parkgate? Roast dinner with all the trimmings? Curry? Pizza? A crispy salad, perhaps? Or food from street vendors, out in some exotic location? Have you started to feel hungry yet?

In the novel "Oliver Twist", Charles Dickens highlighted the meagre rations and cruelty of the workhouse where the boys were fed just one small bowl of watery gruel at mealtimes, with an onion twice a week and half a roll on Sundays. "Wild with hunger," the boys decide that Oliver should be the one to ask for more.

Oliver Twist's fictional situation in the workhouse is sad, but also comical; the description of the skinny children pitted against the plump, well-fed adults is deliberately exaggerated. Yet the condition of many people going hungry today in the real world where there is so much food available, both here in Great Britain and in places like Yemen, is a tragedy and an outrage. The sadness – and my shame, also – is that we can quickly become wearied and unmoved by such situations.

Jesus was exhausted. He had been preaching to vast numbers of people and had just heard the news that his cousin had been executed. All he wanted was to find some quiet space and privacy. A peaceful journey across the water to a remote location the other side of the lake to pray must have seemed a perfect idea. However, the news of his move quickly spread, and, undeterred, huge crowds trekked across country to see him, begging for his healing touch, hungry to learn more.

The disciples see the crowds growing tired and hungry. We can imagine that they felt pretty tired and hungry, too, and anxious as the shadows lengthen into evening. They only have five loaves and a couple of fish of their own. This is not enough to share with over five thousand souls. They presume that all the people will be able to walk away, and that they will have money in their purses to spend. Jesus can tell them to leave now, and everything will be all right.



Jesus does not work to this message. He is full of compassion, despite his own tiredness. He has healed many who have come to this remote place, bringing them to a new, full life. He also sees the deep, basic need for food amongst this huge mass of humanity, men, women and children. He turns to his twelve disciples, telling them to sort the problem out. "You give them something to eat." This response must have taken them by surprise. Surely Jesus will change the situation?

The disciples have to give of themselves in order to make the situation change. They may only have a few rough loaves of bread and two fish, but Jesus asks them to hand them over.

It is in the handing over that Jesus is able to work super-abundantly. Not only does he feed and bless five thousand men and unnumbered women and children, but there are a dozen baskets filled with leftovers, more than enough to sustain any stragglers along the way, or to take back into those remote villages to feed other hungry mouths.

Jesus is fulfilling the promise of Isaiah's prophecy. This food is more than simply energy for the long journey home. They all ate and were satisfied. These scattered, broken people have been sustained so that their souls can delight in this "richest of fare."

Isaiah also foretells that "you will summon nations you know not, and nations that do not know you will hasten to you". In normal circumstances, it would be only the men who would gather to listen to the Rabbi, and only the men who would be fed. Jesus feeds not only the five thousand men, but draws the less-regarded, vulnerable women and children into the banquet. Furthermore, the twelve full baskets of left-over food are a picture of the way that Jesus' love and compassion goes beyond the exclusivity of the twelve tribes of Israel. Nobody is denied a portion of the feast.

That invitation to the feast is extended to us. We are able to share in that glorious food.

Yet the disciples and their offering of five loaves and two fish are a reminder that we too must play our part in this marvellous banquet. We are living in times which can make us feel very weary, and eager to defend and cling on to things we see as "ours". How do you feel when Jesus says, "Bring them here to me"?

Just as we share in this marvellous banquet of Communion, so we are called to share with others. We have been given lavish, transforming love and grace. How can we show this to those we meet? Let's not be weary of doing good to and for others. Where we see injustice and poverty, let's speak out and act. We can be praying for situations even when we don't know what to say or do. Just stopping to offer a listening ear can be a blessing to someone who is isolated. Even those small things can become world-changing if we offer them to God and share them.

The Collect for the Eighth Sunday after Trinity

Lord God,
your Son left the riches of heaven
and became poor for our sake:
when we prosper save us from pride,
when we are needy save us from despair,
that we may trust in you alone;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Rev'd Vicky Barrett