

One Sunday morning a Vicar forgot the notes for his sermon. In the middle of his sermon he got a few of the facts a bit twisted. He said that the Lord took 4000 loaves and 6000 fish and with them fed 24 people, and had plenty left over.

Suddenly someone in the congregation called out, "Anybody could do that!"

"Could you?", asked the vicar.

"I certainly could", replied the man.

After the service the vicar complained about the heckler's conduct, but he was told of his error by the curate. "Well, next week I'll remember my notes and I'll sort out that man!" he said.

The following Sunday, with notes in his hand, the vicar stepped up confidently to deliver his sermon. During the sermon he brought up again the miracle of the loaves and fishes. He told how five loaves and two fish had probably fed as many as 24,000 people. Thinking he'd get one over on the heckler from the previous Sunday he pointed to him and asked, "Could you do that?"

"Of course I could!", claimed the heckler.

"And just how would you do that?" asked the vicar.

The heckler replied, "With all the loaves and fishes left over from last Sunday!"

Feeding people out of our abundance is, as the heckler points out, easy – we can all do that and have done that. Feeding people out of our poverty and scarcity is quite a different matter. And yet that is what happened in our Gospel today. From meagre fare the multitude are fed and satisfied.

Over the last couple of weeks our Gospel readings has presented us with various sayings and parables of Jesus about what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. It's been compared to sown seed, a field of wheat and weeds, a mustard seed and some yeast, hidden treasure, a precious pearl and a fishing net. From these various metaphors and images we can glimpse something of the values and nature of God's Kingdom as has been previously explored, and today's Gospel builds on these parables by putting into practice some of this teaching.

Right at the start of this passage we are told that Jesus heard of the beheading of his cousin, John the Baptist, and took himself off in a boat to a deserted place presumably to grieve for John and reflect on his ministry now that his earthly mentor was gone. An understandable course of action. But his time alone was short lived. The crowd soon learned where Jesus had gone and followed him. This contrasts quite markedly with the few verses immediately before this passage in St Matthew's Gospel where Jesus is being hounded out of his own town of Nazareth, unable to perform many works of healing there, because of their unbelief. Here however, at the Sea of Galilee, a great crowd has gathered. On seeing them, we are told, Jesus had compassion for them and cured their sick.

For most of us, stricken with grief, this would not be our first thought. I doubt we would want to show compassion to others let alone start healing them – even if we could. We would rather be the recipients of other peoples' compassion. I'm sure, if this was me, I would be wanting to tell the people to come back another time. But that's not what Jesus does. He puts aside his own concerns and gets to work on modelling his Father's new Kingdom where all are valued. And then, still out of compassion for the needs of others, comes the main miracle – the feeding of more than 5000 people. Although this has become the main focus, even uniquely being retold in all 4 of the Gospels, it wasn't what the crowd set out to see. Up until this moment the crowd did not know that Jesus could work

miracles in the kitchen. They only knew that he could bring healing to their ailments and that he was a mighty teacher having listened to, or heard about, his teaching on the Mount. Feeding 5000+ people with only 5 loaves and 2 fish would not have occurred to them.

As the story unfolds we learn that it was the disciples who came to Jesus, late in the day, asking him to send the crowd away so that they may go and buy food for themselves. An understandable response. They knew they could not feed all these people. It was a matter of looking after yourselves as far as they were concerned. Perhaps they were even concerned the mood of the crowd could turn nasty when they realised they would be hungry that night. Either way the disciples wanted the crowd to be sent away. Jesus, typically, responds by challenging the disciples and their mind set. 'You feed them' he says. And on learning they have only 5 loaves and 2 fish asks for the food to be set before him. Here, for us who are familiar with these actions 2000 years later, we see similarities with the Eucharistic feast as Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and distributes the food. Again, we are told 'all ate and were filled' and there were even leftovers.

From so little food so many were fed. The disciples would have been astonished, their mind's blown. And yet, perhaps this was simply Jesus reinforcing his teaching through the parables he gave? Remember the parable of the mustard seed: the smallest seed turned into the biggest shrub, resembling a tree. Here, the smallest picnic turned into the biggest feast. Jesus was showing that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near, and in fact, was already among them.

For us, 2000 years on, we may want to try and explain away this miracle as a great example of sharing. Jesus shared and by so doing encouraged others to share. That is of course a logical interpretation and does mirror the values of the Kingdom so is not entirely unhelpful. But the miracle is more than that. It is about God knowing our needs even before we do, and providing for us. It is about changing our perspective from holding onto the little we have to surrendering it in order to gain so much more. It is about being filled and knowing where to find our fulfilment. It is about having compassion for others even when it is the last thing on your mind. For those first disciples this was a real eye-opener. Despite our familiarity with the story, may our eyes and minds be opened again to see the deeper truth within.