

LOOKING AHEAD: SUNDAY AUGUST 6th

Reading: Matthew 14: 13 - 21 [Ninth (9) after Pentecost]

Normal approaches to the feeding of the 5000 often do not move far beyond Sunday School interpretations of it having been a demonstration of Jesus' miraculous powers. But there is surely much more, and at a deeper levels, to this account.

In the New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Eugene M Boring notes that Matthew's story of Jesus is based upon the conflict between the present political realities, the Kingdom(s) of this earth and the Kingdom which Jesus ushers in, the Kingdom of Heaven. The feeding of the 5000 is triggered by Herod's assassination of John the Baptist; it is precipitated "*when Jesus heard what had happened*" [verse 13]. Boring sees a parallel; "*the banquet over which 'King' Herod presides is implicitly contrasted with the meal provided by King Jesus*" [New Interpreters Bible Commentary, Matthew, page 323]. One 'meal' is motivated by a quest for power and is brutal and selfish in its outcomes; the other is borne of compassion for the people and serves to meet their needs.

There are clear echoes in this event to elements which already existed in the story of faith of the people of Israel: references to 'wilderness', 'hunger', doubting and God's leadership of them (then as now). Note the parallels to Exodus 13, specifically verse 18. The people are organised in groups in an almost military manner. Even the grass where they sit is green! There are also 'feeding' stories in the accounts of significant leaders Elisha and Elijah (see 2 Kings 4: 42 – 44 where Elijah feeds 'a hundred people' with twenty loaves of barley). We should hear these resonances and be reminded of their meanings in the faith tradition of the people as this event opens before us. The feeding of the five thousand is not an episode in isolation when read against the existing stories of the people's understandings of their interactions with their God!

If the measure of the most important of Gospel stories were the strength of the tradition and the number of appearances a story makes, then this is surely the most important! The 'Feeding of the Crowds' is included in all four of the Gospels, and in Mark and Matthew twice each! There is one account of a crowd of 5000 (five thousand) fed and another of 4000 (four thousand), noting that Matthew in his typically Jewish style counts only the men (14:21). The numbers are significant given that the estimated population of the villages at the northern end of the Sea of Galilee at Jesus time was around 600 people! The fish and bread are the common foods, again remaining consistent with local custom.

Unusually for the dependence between them, Mark's Gospel actually supplies detail here which Matthew does not include [it is quite often the other way around, Mark being the more succinct]. In Mark, Jesus and the disciples have withdrawn for the purpose of eating (6:31), the crowds arrive ahead of them, they are '*like sheep without a shepherd*' and the disciples ask specifically, '*Shall we buy two hundred denarii worth of bread?*' Matthew 'spiritualises' the account more by omitting such practical details.

Yet, for all that, Matthew does incorporate contexts which are significant in his own story-telling. First, as Jesus seeks withdrawal by boat, this takes him to the eastern shore of the sea, which Boring notes is Gentile territory. That the needs of the wandering crowds are met there is perhaps this Gospel's way of extending Jesus' ministry beyond the Jewish communities of the western side and its associations with removal to maintain religious purity and identity. Further, it is not that the crowds come pleading their hunger. Boring notes that rather the crowds are "*so enthralled by Jesus' healing activity that they are reluctant to leave*" (when evening and meal-time comes) [Matthew, page 324]. It is the disciples who then point to the need for them to eat.

The meal was a much-held image of the Kingdom. The promise was of a great feast when all are gathered in to eat. The miracle we leave open; it is the 'lesser event'. The symbolism and meaning are unquestioned.

This is a renewed, re-interpreted, yet familiar moment in the faith story of the people. The action appears quite deliberate: Jesus has them 'sit down', 'takes the loaves and two fish', 'looked up to heaven', 'blessed and broke it' and then gave it to the crowds. Matthew is clearly anticipating here the Eucharist and uses exactly the same language at his account of Jesus' last meal with the disciples in chapter 26 (verses 20 – 29).

The new community which is opening up in Jesus is extended to the seeking crowds. Jesus won't let them be sent away. The disciples have to ask 'What is the right course of action?' (and, by implication, 'where does our community stop?'). But Jesus, motivated by compassion offers the grace of provision, just as the people had seen under Moses in the wilderness. Now, however, that 'bread' has important new expression – the bread of his giving, which is (already) known to the community of disciples that Matthew is a part of

So, more than a show of miraculous powers, what do we have here? A wandering and lost people, a meal, broken bread. These are celebrated by us in our tradition in the Eucharist. In his "First Thoughts on the Gospel Passages from the Lectionary", Western Australian Biblical scholar Bill Loader poignantly notes, "*The last supper makes sense in the light of all the other meals including this one and they make sense in the light of the vision of liberation and reconciliation which inspired them. To receive him in bread and wine is also to participate in the vision and nourishment which makes it possible. There are very rich connections here*".

THEMES: God's provision, trust, Eucharist