

# Feeding the 4,000

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*The sermon given at the evening BCP Holy Communion Service on 4<sup>th</sup> August 2019 by the Curate, the Revd. Tim Kelly, in Beverley Minster.*

*Mark 8:1-9*

*So ... shall we do this one more time?*

Blink, or have a brief lapse in concentration, and you could well miss the difference: Today's gospel reading is the feeding of the 4000, not the 5000. But many features are the same. It's the same desert setting. It's the same situation of a famished crowd. Jesus again shows compassion. Only meagre provisions of bread and fish exist. But yet food is distributed to everyone present, enough for all to be well satisfied and for there to be plenty of left overs besides. So ... all of these similarities might even lead you to think that this is a mistake. A slip of the pen, or an error in transcribing through the ages. He said 4000 but he surely means 5000? Is the gospel writer just getting confused?

The short answer is no. There are differences. Besides the number of people, the number of loaves and fishes, and the number baskets of remains are different. In this account, the people had been with Jesus for three whole days. And of course, the Gospel of Mark has his own – separate – account of the feeding of the five thousand in Mark 6. So ... why are we being told about this second account? What is Mark trying to show us?

A couple of weeks ago I was preaching on the account of Elijah fleeing the murderous threats of Jezebel and becoming so tired and exhausted that he just wanted to lay down and die. Despite him having had, just a short-while previously, the mountain-top, triumphant, experience of conquering the prophets of Baal, and God miraculously bringing down fire, he was now in the valley – the desert place. The triumph, the miracle was yesterday, and all is now lost. I hear echoes of that very human response in today's reading. The disciples had witnessed the feeding of the 5000, they had been

amazed, they had seen the miracle – how Jesus was able to take a situation that humanly seemed impossible and yet made it possible. But now faced in a very similar situation – to the disciples all seemed impossible again!

They ask plaintively of Jesus, “*How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?*” Despite their past experiences they don’t ask, “Jesus, can you do what you did before?”. Instead, they are back at square one.

Before we get too critical of the slowness of the disciples from our perfect ‘birds-eye’ view of the gospel story we’d do well to ask if we can recognise this very human behaviour in our own lives. I know that I can. Whether you’ve been walking with your faith a long time or a short time, it can be easy for us to forget – or perhaps more accurately *disregard* - the yesterdays of our own faith journeys. That was then, but this is now, we say. Yes, God has done great things for me (such as significant answers to prayer, or moments where God – through his Holy Spirit – felt so close you could almost touch him) but *now* ... well, I can’t expect the same to happen again. Following, a helpful suggestion that I received some years ago, I’ve now taken to writing down – journaling – significant moments. At the time when writing them down, I can think to myself, how could I ever forget this experience, but ... of course ... we do, and I’ve found it hugely encouraging to go back to my journal and look back across the entries. Of course, the disciples didn’t have this opportunity to flip back two chapters and re-read the account of the five thousand!

We can all have mountain-top and valley experiences.

*So ... shall we do this one more time?*

When we *forget* what God has done for us, it can be all too easy for us to fall back on our own understanding and our own resources. We look purely to the *natural* rather than *super-natural* possibilities. And that’s what we see in this gospel account.

*How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?*

Just like the disciples, our tendency can be to limit our outlook, lower our expectations, and reduce our world-view back to things that we can manage, control and understand. But what does Jesus do in this account? Does he chastise the disciples, and tell them to not be so short-sighted? No, he simply says, “OK – shall we do this one more time”. He takes the bread, and takes the fish, and yet again performs the miraculous. It might be easy to imagine, with a bit of creative license, a little sigh from Jesus as he asks them the question, “So how many loaves do you have”? But we have no evidence of this. What we do have evidence of is endless graciousness of Jesus who deals with the disciples’ reversion to the norm and gently takes them through the motions of a miracle once more.

And of course, in the very act that Jesus performs we are reminded that he is full of compassion for the everyday needs of the people. His concern isn’t about demonstrating his authenticity or abilities. The miracles that Jesus performs are never done with this as his focus. This compassion, this *supematural* and extraordinary intervention is for the very natural and ordinary needs of hunger and eating. Jesus doesn’t perform to impress. His motivation and demonstration is love. So if you ever feel that God is so busy with important concerns that he can’t possibly be aware of your needs – be reminded that Jesus has compassion for us, and for those around us, in our everyday needs. That’s why we’re encouraged to pray, “Give us our daily bread”. This passage reminds us, there is nothing too large for him to handle and no need too small to escape his interest.

*So ... shall we do this one more time?*

Let us be grateful that although, like the disciples, we can forget our past experiences and encounters, and can so easily lower our sights and expectations, we have a loving heavenly Father who gently leads us each day, one more time, ready to hear our every concern and engage with us anew.

Amen

## Reading Texts

Mark 8:1-9

**1** In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, **2** "I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat.**3** If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance." **4** His disciples replied, "How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?" **5** He asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" They said, "Seven." **6** Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. **7** They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed. **8** They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. **9** Now there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away.