

Matthew 14:13-21 and Isaiah 55 (2nd August 2020)

Which would you reckon might be the 'best-known' of all Jesus' miracles? Would it be the feeding of the 5000, perhaps? I certainly remember that being one of the most frequently-told Bible stories in my primary school days.

And I'm sure we all love the idea of a free lunch, don't we? But for this crowd of 10000 or more hungry people (because only the adult men are counted in the 'headline' figure of 5000), Jesus was actually introducing them to so much more than just a nice piece of bread and fish to tide them over until their next meal.

So if our understanding of this miracle stops with that 'straightforward' aspect of the story, then (sadly) we're missing the real point. For, as Jesus had reminded the devil, at the very beginning of his ministry (when tempted in the desert): "Man (or woman) does not live by bread alone..."

Hopefully, if you've been following services online over the last couple of months, you'll have spotted that the Sunday Gospel passages have been working their way through Matthew – beginning in Chapter 9 just after Matthew has himself responded to Jesus' call to come and "follow me", and with Jesus standing in a field of crops that are ripe for harvest and asking for workers who'll help to reap a 'harvest' of souls for him.

And the key question which Jesus keeps coming back to (through his teaching and his actions) in these chapters is: How will each of us respond to his call to "Come to me" – to come to Jesus and embrace the 'new kingdom' that he has come to introduce? Will it be with opposition, with indifference, with shallow acceptance, or with full submission?

Then as we move on from the parable of the sower and the other 'parables of the kingdom' in chapter 13, into chapter 14, there's a significant event which isn't covered in our current Anglican lectionary series, but which is referred to in passing at the beginning of today's reading – and that's the execution of John the Baptist.

So we read that "when Jesus heard about what had happened, he withdrew by boat to a deserted place by himself. He'd been reminded of the opposition that his gospel message faced (and will always face), and that he himself was on a path that would shortly see his own execution on the cross, so Jesus needed time out to pray, to re-commit everything he was doing to God the Father.

But his 'withdrawal' was also an act of plain common sense. Herod was pretty likely to come after him next, and it wasn't the right time for that yet – Jesus' ministry here on earth was not yet complete. The crowd though had other ideas – and basically seem to have run hot foot around the side of the lake to meet him as he came ashore.

They didn't waste any time stopping off at Tesco Express to make sure they had food and drink for the journey. They were hungry to hear the words of Jesus; thirsty to experience his life-transforming presence. And of course Jesus – despite his own need for rest, for quiet, and for privacy – immediately put their need first.

As the Bible tells us: “he had compassion for them”. ‘Compassion’ – that’s a word Matthew has used before (and will use again). It came up in that harvest field, a few chapters before: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

He gave the people in the crowd his time, his attention and his care. Specifically, he “cured their sick”. And then (on this occasion) his compassion extended to meeting an ordinary physical need – for food.

He sat them all down in a nice orderly fashion – another bit of good common sense (just imagine the terrible crush that would probably have happened if he’d simply said “over here, grub’s up!”). He took the tiny amount of fish and bread he had, blessed God for it, broke it and gave it to the people.

And there was plenty for everyone. Indeed, more than enough, lots more than enough.

But not only would the crowds have ended up with full stomachs, they’d have also seen Jesus making a statement about who he was. They knew their Jewish history, the story of Moses and manna in the wilderness, of ‘bread from heaven’. So could this be the ‘new Moses’, the ‘Messiah’, the one to bring back (at last) the good old days for Israel?

Yes – but the trouble is, the crowds (or at least most of them) had the wrong idea of what ‘the Messiah’ would be like. And so John’s account of this miracle ends with the people wanting to take Jesus by force to make him king.

Jesus, though, won’t have any of it. Instead, he goes on to declare himself as the “true bread from heaven”: “I am the bread of life,” he says, “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35).

This means Jesus is the fulfilment of that wonderful and uplifting prophecy of Isaiah (chapter 55) – that glorious picture of how life in all its fullness is available to those who respond to that great invitation he lays before us, that invitation to “come, follow me”.

As Isaiah says: come if you’re thirsty, come if you’re hungry, come if you’re empty – come and “delight yourselves in rich food, the richest of fare...”

What are the things which we’d say bring us ‘satisfaction’? When we’re thirsty on a hot summer afternoon, it might be a cool, refreshing drink. When we’re hungry in the middle of a tough mountain walk, a nice chunky Mars bar can be a real pick-me-up. And when we’re tired out after a long day’s work, a soft and comfy sofa would seem just the job.

Those are all ‘physical’ things (of course), but what about our other ‘needs’? For a sense of purpose, for intimate relationships, for a feeling of worth? What might ‘satisfy’ those needs? A fulfilling job, a close family, the appreciation of a friend?

Yes, for a lot of us, we might (quite reasonably!) find lots of ‘satisfaction’ in most or all of these things – but only up to a point. And Isaiah’s challenge to us is: why invest everything in “what does not (fully) satisfy”? Instead, come to Jesus, and find true satisfaction there.

Because Jesus is the one who ultimately satisfies us – what we thirst for, what we hunger for, our need for rest. And the one who meets our yearning for purpose in life, for deep relationship and for a sense of worth.

“Come, without money and without price, and delight yourselves in this richest of food.” So what exactly is this ‘richest of fare’ that’s on offer, free of cost? Verse 7 tells us – it’s mercy, pardon, the forgiveness that’s freely available because Jesus buys it for us on the cross.

Forgiveness under the new covenant sealed by his blood, an everlasting covenant with an everlasting sign – nothing less than the transformed universe described at the end of the chapter (verses 12 & 13). A joyous world, a peaceful world, a world of harmony where all creation joins, for ever, as one, in praise of our Lord – for his renown, for his glory.

“Come, ...and eat.” That’s Jesus’ invitation to us. But it’s an invitation with an urgency to it; we should not assume it will remain open for ever – (verse 6) “Seek the Lord while he may be found, call on him while he is near”. It’s an invitation with an ‘RSVP’ written on it – so let’s make sure we reply ‘yes’.