

Bread of Life

Matthew 14:13-21

Of all the stories of miracles in the Gospels, the feeding of the 5,000 is one that seems to generate a lot of questions about whether it really could have happened. Was there really some miraculous multiplication of food, or were people shamed into sharing what they had available? To me, this is asking the wrong questions.

As I'm sure you appreciate, in the ancient world there were no recording devices. Few speeches were even written down at the time and so historians and biographers were less focused on history as we know it today – a record of events and facts – and more focused on telling the stories that tell us about the person. The question to ask of the Gospels, and other ancient histories, is not whether or not it literally happened, but why was the story included (and, of course, what does it tell us about Jesus).

This story of the feeding of the 5,000 must be significant in early Christian tradition. It is the only miracle story that is found in all four gospels. Additionally, if we consider that two Gospels have a similar feeding of 4,000, we get six slightly different versions of the same story – it must be important.

The Gospel of Matthew is one of the Gospels that also has a feeding of the 4,000 at the end of chapter 15. However, it also has two stories of feasts side by side. Unfortunately, the lectionary skips over this other feast story; this other story is important for understanding today's reading.

Between the parables that we have been hearing over the last few weeks and today's story, Herod has a birthday feast. From what history tells us about Herod, he would have put on quite a show with rich, luxury foods imported in for the occasion. This was a feast to behold. We also know that Herod was a violent man. There's no evidence for the slaughter that Matthew records of the infants, but it was not far off from Herod's personality. Because Herod claimed to be Jewish, there was a pun (in Greek) that it was safer to be Herod's pigs than his sons.

Not much is said about that feast, other than the entertainment involved, because the focus is on John the Baptist. John, in Matthew's Gospel, was the fiery preacher calling people to account and threatening those who would not respond with punishment from God. No wonder he seriously annoyed Herod, who thought he could do what he wanted and would do anything – even kill his own sons – to maintain his grip on power.

The feeding of the 5,000 (or in Matthew's version, 5,000 men, plus women and children) is the opposite. Jesus has gone away to get some time to himself. Unlike Luke's Gospel, where Jesus and John are cousins, Matthew's Gospel does not say anything about this relationship. However, it must have been rather upsetting to see another itinerant preacher being executed simply for preaching what those in authority did not want to hear. If nothing else, it was

a reality check and a warning about what was likely to be ahead for anyone who stood up to authority.

However, Jesus cannot get away from the crowds. OK, on the boat he had some quiet time, presuming his disciples weren't demanding anything of him, but he reaches a space where he would reasonably assume he could have time for reflection and prayer, but no, the crowds have followed him. Jesus sees their need and in Matthew's version he focuses on healing the crowds whereas in Mark, he is teaching them. Why the difference? Perhaps because Matthew is showing Jesus as taking seriously all the elements of human brokenness. Although in other places in the Gospel the message is spiritualised, here it is focused on the actual human need. It is a recognition that without dealing with physical needs first, the spiritual needs can never be met.

This is underscored with the practicality of sending the crowds away to find food. If it's a deserted place, the few villages nearby – remembering villages typically had a population of around 150 people – would not have the capacity to feed a crowd of that size. Jesus is not just caring for those who came to see him, but also for those who would experience the impact of a hungry crowd looking for a meal, that social conventions said would have to be provided.

So our two feasts juxtapose opulence with simplicity, compassion with greed, and death with life. It asks us to reflect on which side we stand: with Herod or with Jesus. Are we, like Herod, going to give a feast of opulence to the “right” people, the ones who can pay us back or keep us with our power. Or will we stand with Jesus and his compassion on all those who seek the healing and wholeness he offers to all who come?

And importantly, we need to ask the question of what it means to be one of his disciples today in this story? What are the loaves and fishes that we bring to give out to the crowds, as his disciples did so long ago?