

The story of the feeding of the five thousand, or should I say the 5000 men plus women and children, is one of the best known stories in the bible. And we are all clearly supposed to know the story because it is one of the few incidents in Jesus' life that is recorded in all four gospels. And that really helps us because the different gospel writers give us different pieces of information that we can pull together. So let's start with a bit of scene gathering.

The passage starts, "Some time after this." In the previous chapter of John's gospel Jesus had been in Jerusalem, and now, all of a sudden, he is on the shores of Lake Galilee – quite a distance away. This does remind us that the gospels are not a comprehensive, complete, narrative of what happened in the 3 years of Jesus' ministry – if they had been they would have been considerably longer, and probably quite repetitive at times. We don't know how Jesus got from Jerusalem to Galilee, how long it had taken, and so how long a gap there has been since, if you like, the end of chapter 5, but our author, John, clearly doesn't think that matters.

What we do know though is that Jesus has a large following – a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick. So Jesus was busy, he was successful in interesting people in what he was talking about, and then he needed some space. So Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. And John then tells us that the Jewish Passover Feast was near. Why did he tell us that?

Well, the Jews travelled to Jerusalem from all over the country for the Passover Festival, so John was perhaps telling us that there were even more people than usual looking out for this new teacher that they had heard about. And then the crowd caught up with them. And then we get a couple of interesting interactions with two of the disciples who we don't hear a great deal about.

First there is Philip. "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" Jesus asks Philip. Here is where the other gospels' accounts of the story help us out. Through them we learn that Philip is a local man – he is from Bethsaida which is pretty close to where they are, and so he is the obvious person to ask. But Philip has no idea. "Eight months wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" You can just imagine him thinking – "No we don't have enough money, and where on earth am I going to find enough bread to feed all these people anyway?" So why is Jesus asking Philip this question? John tells us in his commentary to the story. "He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do."

So Jesus is asking Philip an impossible question? Why is he doing this? Is Jesus trying to trick Philip, to make him look a bit daft?"

The answer to this can be found at the beginning of the book of Hebrews.

In chapter 1 verse 3 we find this really powerful and important verse. "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word." Or to put another way – if you want to know what God is like – look at Jesus. If you want to know what God will do, look at what Jesus did.

But hang on a minute. Jesus is asking Philip where they can get food from to feed these people. Jesus is asking Philip an impossible question. Why is he doing this? To test him is what John is telling us. And Philip is coming back with a perfectly sensible, perfectly logical response. But is that the sort of response that Philip should have come back with?

Philip was one of Jesus' 12 – one of the closest people Jesus worked with. Philip had by this time heard a lot of teaching, seen a lot of miracles including many sick people being healed. Philip had witnessed the impossible happening and so Jesus was expecting, or perhaps just hoping, that Philip might come back and say something a bit more hopeful than, "Well no we can't do this."

Is Jesus being a little unfair in his question. Remember it is through Jesus that we understand what God is like. Would God ever ask you to do something which is impossible for you to accomplish alone? I hope it doesn't worry you too much when I tell you that the answer, "Absolutely he would."

Jesus asked Philip – a test.

God tests his people. How do I know that?

James 1: 2-3. "Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow."

1 Thessalonians 2:4 "For we speak as messengers approved by God to be entrusted with the Good News. Our purpose is to please God, not people. He alone examines the motives of our hearts."

1 Peter 1: 6-7 "So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honour on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world."

So what is God testing – he is testing your faith.

So was Philip wrong in the answer he gave? Different translations and different gospel accounts have this slightly differently but Philip is saying even with 6 months wages or 8 months wages or 200 denarii – a denarius was about a man's wage for a day's work – they would not have enough to give each person a bite to eat – so he was absolutely right in his reasoning, but he failed the test. He gave a worldly response. He failed to factor in God as he answered the question. And is that not like what we tend to do?

Last week I talked about the Kingdom of God and how we don't have to build the Kingdom of God here because it is already here. What we have to do is introduce people to it. But I rather think what this reading is telling us is that we have to live in that Kingdom ourselves perhaps better than we already do. How strong is our faith?

If we really felt God saying to us this morning, that in order to worship him better, and this really is just a very hypothetical example, in order to be in a better position to introduce more people to the wonderful Kingdom, we needed to reorder this church building at a cost of £120,000, if we really felt that was what God was saying to us, would we be like Philip and say, "Well where are we going to get the money from to do that?" or would we say that if that is what God wants that is what we shall do. Yes an extreme example, and please never quote that figure because I just made it up, but do you see what I mean. This is a God who can do immeasurably more than we can ever imagine, and are we too restricted by what we believe is humanly possible?

Back to the story, because we are about to meet two other characters that are just as important as Philip; first that second disciple. "Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?""

We don't hear a lot about Andrew but there are two significant things he is recorded as having done.

It was Andrew who introduced his brother Simon Peter to Jesus, and it is now Andrew that introduces this boy to Jesus. Don't we all need to be Andrews. Is it not our role to introduce people to Jesus. Once we have made the introduction then Jesus will try and do the next stage – that's not our job. I have said on many occasions that it is my job as a priest to bring people to the door and when Jesus knocks, encourage them to open the door. I think that is the sort of person that Andrew was and the sort of role that he took on.

And then the third character, the boy himself. He didn't have much. He had 5 barley loaves. Barley bread was not great. Decent bread was made from wheat – if someone was eating barley bread, which was quite dense and hard to digest, but barley was much cheaper than wheat, then he would have been from a poor family. And he had 2 fish. Don't imagine nice fresh cod or salmon. The fish that was available from the Sea of Galilee and available to a poor family would have been a very small fish, and what these fish would probably have been would have been some sort of dried fillet which was there to try and make that heavy bread more digestible. But that didn't matter, because the boy was willing to give what he had – and that is what he did. It's another story like the widow's mite. Again a message for us all there.

And we rather know the rest of the story don't we. And the people didn't just have a little – they all had enough to eat. You can just imagine the scene can't you – something like 10,000 people sitting in this grassy field on the hillside with that contented, well fed look on their faces – all thanks to Jesus.

So at the end of this story what have we learned about the character of God as seen through the character of his son Jesus.

We see his goodness, his compassion. These people who had followed him were hungry, and he wanted to feed them.

We see his provision – as feed them he did.

We see his generosity – they all had enough to eat

We see his abundance – those 12 baskets of left overs – not left lying around in the field, but collected up in the disciples baskets so that food could be passed on to the poor.

And the people there understood what they had just seen. "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." But Jesus was not ready to be seen as a King. He certainly didn't want to be the King that they were expecting. So he went off to the mountainside by himself, no doubt to pray to his Father.

A fabulous story that helps us build up our picture of our churches here in these 4 villages.

And just remember, because we don't have time to study that story as well, whatever we end up doing in these churches, whoever we meet on the way, whatever challenges we face, if we come across stormy waters, Jesus is there to look after us. Now there's a comforting thought to finish on.

Reading: John 6: 1-21

Lessons from the 5,000

Fowlmere

Amen