

Feeding the Five Thousand

John 6: 1-14

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, 'Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?' Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.' So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.' (NRSV)

Walking, talking, healing, teaching.

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Day after day, crowds pressing in on him with a never-ending succession of needs.

People's brokenness waiting for him at every turn and corner

and the eyes of the scribes and Pharisees tracing his every move,

trying to catch him out,

protecting their own interests.

This Galilean is getting too well known, too well-followed.

He is a threat to the status quo at the Temple.

If they're not careful the whole lot will come tumbling down, just as he said it would.

And so he retreats to Galilee, to the gentleness of the rolling hills

and the beauty of the Lake and its shores.

Here he hopes to find peace on the far side of the Lake,

but even there, the crowds come, clamouring for signs;

more sick made whole, more teaching to this godless generation.

They are hungry for him.

He goes to the mountain and seats himself with his disciples and the crowd presses in.

He sees their hunger; empty eyes, empty stomachs, empty souls.

Knowing, he asks the disciples,

How are we to buy bread for all these?

Philip panics,

Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for all these even to taste a morsel.

A boy steps forward with two fish and five small barley loaves and offers them,

a gesture of innocent, but complete generosity, radical hospitality.

Andrew misunderstands,

What is this among so many?

If he had listened to his teacher more intently,

if the disciples had watched Jesus more closely,

perhaps, as he seated himself on the mountainside,

they might have recalled another teacher; another leader,

who called on Yahweh to provide food for his people in the wilderness.

They might have recalled too,

that it was on the mountainside that Moses brought down the Law on two stone tablets;

the Law that is called by the Rabbis,

‘The bread of heaven’, because it feeds and nourishes hearts and minds.

But their minds are still on worldly things;

on five thousand empty stomachs.

They did not see the real hunger that Jesus saw,

the real longing for that other kind of bread that would feed their famished souls;

fill their empty lives with good things.

But He sees. Jesus sees deep into the hearts and lives of each one;

searching and knowing their sitting and rising, their paths and their lying down,

their longings, their cravings, desires and yearnings.

Make them sit down on the grass,

for the shepherd had led them to where there was plenty of green grass.

He makes me to lie down in green pastures.

He gives thanks and breaks and shares the bread and the fish and they are all satisfied.

The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.

And so on the mountainside, Scripture is fulfilled as the Shepherd feeds his sheep;
as God comes among his people and gives them the Bread of Life.
The remainder is gathered up and fills twelve baskets.
Nothing is lost, this bread can be saved to give to others; others who are hungry too.

This is not the Manna from heaven that Moses gave to the people
to nourish their bodies in the wilderness.
That Manna was perishable; only good for a day.
This bread though, this bread is the Bread of life –
And God's gratuitous generosity satiates their hollow hunger.
And even these saved fragments are an abundance;
baskets full of crumbs, sustenance that continue to give life;
new bread given, not in the wilderness, but on a mountainside pasture,
not on stone tablets as the Law was given, the bread of heaven,
but the *fulfilment* of the Law and the prophets.

I AM the Bread of Life. Declares Jesus.

The bread which Moses gave you came from the Father in heaven.

I AM the Bread of Life.

The Bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives light to the world.

*I am the Bread of Life; anyone who comes to me shall not hunger,
and anyone who believes in me shall not thirst.*

This is the true bread; the bread that feeds and nourishes,
the authentic bread that fulfils all and is for all.
The Manna of the wilderness was limited, perishable and given only for Israel,
but this bread; this new, present gift of God
comes down from heaven and gives life to the whole world.
This bread is both, the contrast and the continuation of what went before;
the fulfilment of all Scripture.

Just as the Samaritan woman by the well says

Give me this water',

so they say,

Give us this bread, always.

But the Jews misunderstand and begin murmuring.

How can he say he has come down from heaven,

surely he is Joseph's the carpenter's son?

We know his mother and his father.

They think they know Jesus's origins, but their heads are stuck in the earthly realm.

Jesus has come from the Father, from heaven. He is the Bread of Heaven

given to nourish us eternally, to give universal life everlasting.

This event recalls Moses on the mountainside as teacher and Lawgiver,

Prophet and leader of Israel.

It is described by John in terms of real time – near the Passover

and real place – on the other side of the Lake.

There is real, physical, human hunger

which matches the crowd's real, profound spiritual hunger for the Word of God, the Bread of Life.

This is the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets;

the moment when God perfects in Jesus the feeding of his people.

The shepherd feeds his flock.

In John's Gospel, there is no Last Supper, no institution of the Eucharist, as such.

Jesus gives the people –in fact, the world - the bread of life that will last forever.

This *is* about who Jesus is – The bread of Life, but also about what Jesus *does*.

Jesus gives life everlasting.

He perfects the earlier gift of life-giving nourishment of the Torah,

but gone are the former limitations of the chosen people.

This is a universal gift.

Those who come to Jesus and believe in him will be able to rest

from the never-ending search for wisdom.

No longer will those who eat of him hunger and those who drink of him thirst for more.

Jesus is the fulfilment of Moses and the Wisdom of the Torah

and satisfies the deepest longings and cravings – and - needs of the whole of humanity.