



## Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

# FEEDING SUCH A CROWD

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### John 6:1-15

You join us in the Wesley Theatre as we continue in what could be called 'a brief incursion' of just five weeks in John's Gospel. When exploring Chapters 5 and 6 in John, we gain rich insight into the ministry of Jesus and the work which he calls us to share with him.

This evening, we see Jesus miraculously feeding a huge crowd of people by using the barley loaves and fishes of a young lad from the crowd. This simple meal, in what could almost be called a picnic setting, becomes a feast shared by all. We keep in mind:-

- Jesus was once again seeking rest and renewal by withdrawing from the crowds, similar to what we have read in Mark
- This is the only miracle that is recorded in all four gospels
- The crowd is so impressed by what they have heard and seen that they want to make him king "by force". This is a mob-like response!
- As we observe, we are invited to experience a sense of wonder, as well as community

This incident, recorded by all the gospel writers, took place on the grassy hills on the shores of Lake Galilee. It comes at a time when the ministry of Jesus is reaching a significant moment. The popularity, as well as the vulnerability, of Jesus is cresting. Wherever he went, he was followed by crowds, including a rich variety of different kinds of people. There were, however, times when he wanted to be alone – and yet he was very rarely afforded this opportunity.

It is helpful to put the account into its context in John's Gospel. John the Baptist had just been executed by the order of Herod. It might be worth considering the thought that Jesus needed time to grieve. John was his relative, friend and forerunner. Perhaps the death of John provoked the sombre thought of what might lie ahead for Jesus.

We are told that a large crowd made the 16 kilometre journey around the lake to meet Jesus. Mark defines Jesus' attitude in a celebrated thought: "He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." (Mark 6:34) Jesus wanted some respite, but this was to turn out to be anything but a secluded retreat.

The opening section of John 6 sets the scene for the whole chapter, which directs our thinking to the larger theme of "Jesus as the Bread of Life". Some commentators interpret the passage in relation to the Communion or Lord's Supper. I can understand why, because we know that John omits such reference from his account of the Passion of Jesus.



As host at the meal, Jesus gave thanks and distributed the food, exactly as he would have done at any meal. The word translated 'gave thanks' is related to the word we use for 'eucharist'. The link between the two holds meaning as we study this passage.

In John, miracles or signs invariably lead to tranches of teaching or explanations of deeper truths – and the chapter will reach its pinnacle in verse 35 when we hear these words upon the lips of Jesus: "I am the Bread of Life."

The popularity of Jesus makes it difficult for him to have any control over people's reactions and responses. Their enthusiasm just builds more momentum. The hurt and those in need follow him wherever he goes.

I have considered the wide-ranging groups of people who might have been represented. Consider just three:-

- There are those in need of help
- There are the disciples themselves
- There are certainly the religious observers

I wonder what a passage of this kind has to say to us. How we can apply its truths to our own mission and ministry? Let me suggest three helpful ways in which we can explore this theme.

### **The needs of many**

You cannot avoid consideration of the great need that is obvious throughout this account. There was an intellectual need that led the crowd to make a long journey over a short period of time. There was the obvious spiritual need that must have been apparent in this desire to be with Jesus Christ.

We meet not one hungry person, but five thousand! Throughout the gospel, there are so many examples of those to whom Jesus reached out and brought healing and wholeness. The difference in this feeding of the crowd is the new dimension of Jesus ministering to a number at one and the same time.

For me, the words recorded in Matthew and Luke at the Temptations of Jesus are instructive: "People do not live on bread alone." (Matthew 4:4 and Luke 4:4)

Here at Wesley Mission, I am very aware of the multiple expressions of need. That thought is not far from my reflection on this incident.

Practical needs always matter and, even in an advanced country like Australia, the growing number of people who need food, clothing and information grows day-by-day. Here the crowd needed food and, if you consider the fact that they had made a lengthy journey, possibly overnight, the need cannot be ignored!

Human need is difficult to respond to at any time but, when it presents itself in a need where the weight is so great that it is beyond our ability to make any appreciable difference, it is hard to know where to turn.



On this particular occasion, Jesus does not satisfy this hunger because of poverty, but merely because there is no food available. For some people, this has challenged their handling of the the passage, but I find it important – for we know that the food was necessary if they were going to be able to hear what Jesus would say to such a crowd.

The food represents human need in all its different guises.

The importance of bread at the time of Jesus cannot be overstated. The subject of bread is very significant in our understanding of God in the Bible.

The most important event in the Old Testament was the Exodus – the trip from Egypt to the Promised land. But what caused the Hebrews to be in Egypt in the first place? It was the need of bread, if you recall. The wheat crop had failed due to drought, and the Hebrews had migrated to the land of the Pharaoh because there was a surplus in storage there. It was bread (or the lack of it) that initiated a whole chain of events.

In a broadcast address, the great writer T S Eliot talked about ‘spiritual awareness’. He observed that many people aspire to become Christians and believe, presumably, in the efficacy of the Christian faith, but never reach the stage of actually experiencing it.

Donald McLeod wrote, “Aspiring towards real belief, that is becoming truly Christian, is one thing, whereas complete awareness of it is another. Aspiring can easily become an end in itself.”

Charles H Duthie of Edinburgh remarked, “It’s a matter of living forever in the preface and never becoming involved in the story.”

We live in a world of great need.

### **The perplexity of the disciples**

This is one of those occasions when the attitude of the disciples is of particular interest. You get the feeling that Jesus is carefully measuring the attitude and response of the disciples.

We remind ourselves that Jesus had already sent the disciples out in pairs to undertake his work. This would seem to be a training period for the disciples.

Philip is singled out from the rest of the disciples. It is Jesus who recognises such a large crowd coming towards him, so he asked Philip, “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” (v.5) Interestingly, in his gospel John adds, “He only asked this to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.” (v.6)

Philip’s response is entirely plausible: “Eight months’ wages could not buy enough food for each one to have a bite!” (v.7)

We may be familiar with the fact that it is Andrew who launches in to report the presence of a boy and his lunch, but he also adds, “... but how far will they go among so many?” (v.9)



Andrew is obviously one who looked out to see possibilities in others. We have already met him in John's Gospel, bringing his brother Simon, after he had met Jesus Christ. (1:41) The fact that Andrew brings the boy is only recorded in John, but Andrew is realistic about what the boy has to offer.

As we consider the perplexity of the disciples, it is worth noting that Jesus chooses not to rebuke either Philip or Andrew for what we would call their 'realistic assessment' of the situation. If Jesus is training the disciples, there is something positive in both Philip's and Andrew's responses.

- Philip's response was calculated and yet hesitant
- Andrew's reaction holds out some hope, but with a realism that questions how such a crowd could be fed from so little

The disciples were well aware that there was little they could do in themselves to meet such great and presenting need. They certainly didn't have the food to hand to satisfy the kind of enormous appetite that would be present with such a large crowd.

Recognising our own inability or inadequacy can be a very positive feature. This is not to be confused with the kind of Christian understanding (or lack of it) which suggests that people count for nothing. To acknowledge need certainly should not rob us of dignity. God empowers us with dignity because of our acknowledgement of such need – and we find ourselves at a place where grace can and is operative in our lives.

What is true for individuals is also true for communities – that we are incapable in ourselves of delivering the kingdom of God. We need to be people and communities of grace.

The disciples would need to understand the power of this small and apparently insignificant gift.

We note that the story does not end with Jesus feeding the multitudes. Unquestionably, the people are really impressed. We read, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." (v.14) We may feel, at last the crowd is beginning to understand – but this is far from the case! Actually, right at the point when people, including the disciples, seem to have accepted something of Who he is, Jesus departs from the crowd to be alone.

The great theologian Karl Barth once said that people come to church asking "Is it true?" Tom Long, in our own generation, suggested that most people are simply asking "Will it work for me?"

Following Jesus Christ is not merely another way of getting what we want; it is rather opening ourselves up to be the means whereby God achieves his purposes.

Complex needs require joined-up answers – and the way Jesus responded to this crowd demonstrates it is togetherness that really holds part of the answer and, when added to by his grace, solutions can be found.



## The enormous resource in Christ

The fact that this incident is recorded in each of the four gospels must cause us to ask questions about its significance and meaning.

No-one could have heard this account in the life of the early Christian community without making a link in their minds to the “manna in the wilderness” (Exodus 16).

We are told that the needs of the people are met, but that it also exceeded all expectations: “When they had all had enough to eat, he said to the disciples, ‘Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.’ So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.” (v.v. 12-13)

Here is one of the great themes of John’s Gospel – the abundance of God’s gift of grace! Both the disciples and the boy play important parts in the miracle. When God acts, he often calls people to share with him in what he wants to do.

Does that raise questions in your mind about how you may be called to be a co-worker with Jesus Christ? Thomas à Kempis reminded us, “Do not be self-sufficient but place your trust in God.”

Lake Galilee was teeming with small fish and what fed the great crowd was something akin to the convenience food of the day. Small fish were pickled and exported from this region across the Roman Empire.

The food was sufficient for all and the disciples together are given just one role in John’s telling of the account – to collect the left-overs that remain (v.12).

Each of the disciples would have a basket. Such baskets were bottle-shaped and no Jew on a journey would ever travel without one. It was carried partly because of the need to observe Jewish rules of cleanliness when eating. From the fragments, each of the disciples filled his basket.

In Charles Dickens’ powerful work *Oliver Twist*, dramatised on stage and screen with the wonderful music of Lionel Bart, there is a high moment when young Oliver in the workhouse walked to the front and said, “Sir, please may I have some more.” The response of Mr Bumble was to shout, “More!” a number of times.

‘More’ is exactly what God presents us with in the Person of Jesus Christ. One of my favourite passages of scripture comes from the pen of St Paul who, when writing to his special Christian community, the Philippians, said, “And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:19)

The boy who appeared to have very little to offer becomes the means of feeding a great crowd. Barley bread was the bread of the poor, but it became the richest of fare for those who shared on that memorable day.

No wonder this marvellous meal is mentioned in each gospel. How could anyone have ever forgotten it if they were there?

