

John 6:1-15 (and 25-71), The Feeding of the 5000

Now we're in the 4th of our series on the 7 signs, or miracles, in John's Gospel. You may remember that as Dave, and then Stephen last week, have already explained, John's Gospel recorded for us 7 miracles, or signs, that build a picture of Who Jesus is and what it means to trust in Him. And each of the 7 miracles adds to the picture John wants us to see of who Jesus is.

Today, we come to the feeding of the 5000, the fourth sign.

We all have desires, don't we? Or to put it differently, we have appetites. There are basic appetites that do need to be satisfied so that we can live, like our appetite for food. But perhaps we have strong appetites for particular foods – chocolate, for example! And we have other appetites we want to satisfy: things such as friends, relationships, popularity, holidays, hobbies, (shopping?!). But today, from the feeding of the 5000, we'll see how Jesus satisfies the most important appetite, maybe an appetite we're not always sufficiently aware we should have.

We'll begin by looking at the feeding of the 5000 miracle itself. This is our reading from John's Gospel Ch 6v1-15. Then to find out what the deeper meaning of this miracle is, we'll pick out some key points from Jesus' teaching following the miracle later in the chapter.

So first, the miracle of feeding the 5000.

We'll see the challenge Jesus issues, then Jesus satisfies, then the crowd misunderstands.

V1-4 set the scene by telling us Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee. This meant He crossed from the west side, where He did much of His ministry in Galilee, to the east side, more particularly the higher area now known as the Golan Heights. And a great crowd followed Him because they saw the miracles of healing He did.

Now Jesus issues the challenge – v 5-9. Jesus saw the great crowd coming towards Him, a crowd that needed to be fed. And it was a huge crowd – v10 says there were 5000 *men*, so if women and children were added, the total may have been as many 20,000 people! This number is big enough to be the population of a small town! Of course the disciples did not have any food to feed them with. What would Jesus do?

He asked Philip where they can buy bread for them. But Jesus knew He was going to do the miracle. So the reason He asked Philip that question was to test him to show the extent of his dependence on Him. Philip said it would take more than a half a year's wages to provide enough for each person in the crowd to have a mere bite! Philip only saw their existing money resources – no way did they have enough money to buy bread to feed 20,000 people.

Then another of the twelve, Andrew, maybe thinking a little more out of the box, pointed out a boy who had five small barley loaves and two small fish. He did identify limited resources, but the boy had nowhere near enough to feed the vast crowd. But, as v11 says, Jesus gave thanks for these five small barley loaves and two small fish, and with them fed the 20,000.

So we come to the next point: Jesus satisfies. V11 said the people had as much as they wanted. V12 says they all had enough to eat. This is much more than the mere "bite" that the

more than half a year's wages that Philip said would have bought each person. The appetites of all the 20,000 crowd were *satisfied!* Jesus doesn't give mere tit bits. He *satisfies!* And there were twelve baskets full of leftover bread.

The twelve baskets of leftovers may be symbolic of the 12 tribes of God's Old Testament people Israel, thus would speak of God's abundant supply of spiritual life for His New Testament people, His new church, which of course was started and cared for by 12 apostles.

But, and this is the next point,

The crowd misunderstands

V14-15 say that after the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they started saying, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come to the world".

Why were they saying this? In the Old Testament, after Moses led the Old Testament people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, they were hungry in the wilderness, and God miraculously provided a bread called "manna" for them to eat (Exodus 16). And, God promised Moses (in Deut Ch 18vs15 & 18) a prophet like Moses would come in the future. So after Jesus miraculously fed the 20,000 (in another wilderness-type setting in hill country), the people naturally thought He must be this Prophet. Jesus doesn't indicate they were wrong in their judgement that He was the prophet, but they misunderstood His significance and why He came.

And the other relevant thing was the Jews in Jesus' time longed for liberation from the Roman occupation of their country. Just as Moses had led the people from slavery in Egypt, surely Jesus, who fed the 20,000, must be that military king to free them from Roman oppression. Imagine what it was like in Nazi-occupied Europe in the 1930s and 40s, how those people would have longed for liberation. Jews in Israel in Jesus' time would have felt much the same.

So people wanted a mighty heaven-sent man who would be a prophet and military king to rescue them from the Romans. Perhaps they wanted someone a bit like in those superhero films, where there's a crisis, danger, oppression then superman comes to the rescue and it's all sorted. Or, having just seen the film "The Darkest Hour", even someone like Churchill who came at one of this nation's most darkest and dangerous times and stood up to the Nazis and saved us from invasion.

But Jesus wouldn't allow the crowd to make him king. Why? Because that was not the type of King or leader He came to be. Later in John's gospel, (Ch 18v36) Jesus said His Kingdom, his Kingship is not of and from this world. That is, His Kingship is about God's loving rule from heaven coming into peoples' lives, bringing them spiritual life.

Yes, we can learn things from the miracle about being dependent on God to provide when we feel our own weakness, and when our resources seem to be small for big demands that are made of us— maybe a big task at work, or caring for people. Or maybe in our mission to tell others about Jesus, we see tens of thousands in this town alone who need to hear the gospel, let alone the billions in the wider world mission field. It's easy to feel we're too small in numbers or finances to have a real impact. But God do more than we might think with the

few resources we have, however weak we feel we are if we offer what we have with thanks and use it for God's glory in dependence on Him.

But what is the bigger, main thing the miracle teaches us about Jesus? The crowd were only concerned to have their stomachs filled and to be rid of Roman oppression. So what is this deeper meaning of the miracle they didn't understand? Well, Jesus Himself tells us what He wants us to understand from the miracle.

The next day after the miracle, the twelve disciples and Jesus, later followed by the crowd, had by now crossed back to the west side of Galilee. Jesus was teaching in a dialogue with the people in the synagogue in Capernaum.

And we now get to the second part of this talk. This is where we can get some help from the later part of John Ch 6, vs25-71.

The meaning of the miracle, which is: Jesus is the Bread of Life and we must believe in Him to have eternal life

Jesus tells us plainly in vs35 and 48, "I am the bread of life".

This is one of Jesus' "I am" sayings in John's Gospel. "I am" has echoes of how God disclosed Himself to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3, "I AM WHO I AM" - the always-existing God Who was never created and has life within Himself, never having been given life from outside Himself. And Jesus as the bread of life has come to share that life with us.

We've already mentioned that when the Israelites in the Old Testament were hungry after leaving Egypt, they were miraculously fed by God, thus keeping them alive. Those who were talking to Him asked about this bread from heaven in Exodus. Jesus replies in v33 that *He* is the bread from heaven that gives life to the world. So, *the feeding of the 5,000 shows us it's Jesus who the manna from heaven miracle in the Old Testament points to.*

This passage speaks of believing in Jesus for eternal life a number of times. Just to look at one, see v35 again. Jesus says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." The Israelites in the Old Testament were fed by the manna so they had as much as they needed (Exodus 16v18). Jesus fed the crowd in the feeding miracle so each had the food they needed. Now He says He completely satisfies forever our deepest and most important need in life. He's the 'bread' needed for everlasting spiritual life, which is our most important need. And we need to come to Jesus, to believe in Him, to receive it.

So in v40, Jesus says "For my Father's will is that everyone who *looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life*, and I will raise them up at the last day." Eternal life is the everlasting spiritual life God gives, and it means knowing God in a personal way (John ch 17v3). This life is received the moment we first truly trust in Christ and goes on forever after death into eternity because as Jesus was raised from the dead, we will be. So Jesus the bread of life satisfies this deepest need to know God in a personal way for ever. Jesus is true food for our souls.

Believing in Jesus for eternal life is a major theme in John's gospel. That's why John wrote it. In ch20v31, John says he wrote about these things (the 7 signs in particular) so that we might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that *by believing we may have life in His name*. Ch 3v16, says this too, and also says why it is *so important* to believe in Jesus. Why? Because of the two alternative eternal destinies it mentions: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever *believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*".

There're two particular things about believing in Jesus to understand.

First, believing in Jesus means specifically trusting in His sacrificial death

This is very important. Seev51: Jesus says of Himself, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, *which I will give* for the life of the world." He is looking towards His sacrificial death on the cross. And Jesus goes on in these verses to speak of eating His flesh, and drinking His blood. In the Bible, shed blood from a body indicates violent death, often given in a sacrificial death. And Jesus' death on the Cross was His once and for all time sacrificial giving of Himself to bear God's wrath for our sin, so that that we can receive eternal life.

Jesus' language about eating His flesh and drinking His blood does not refer to taking the bread and wine at the Holy Communion service. Rather, it's a way of talking about believing in Him, trusting in Him and His death for eternal life. But because the bread and wine in Holy Communion service symbolise Jesus' body broken for us and His blood shed for us in His sacrificial death, we can by faith in Jesus death be spiritually nourished as we take the bread and wine. And we'll be doing this shortly.

The second thing about believing in Jesus is believing in Jesus comes through God's word. In v63 Jesus says, the *words* He speaks are full of the Spirit and are life. So Jesus brings us eternal life by His words. Where do we find His words? Of course in the Bible. All the Bible is God's word to us.

So, Jesus is the bread of life, and we must believe in Him to have eternal life. That's what Jesus intends the feeding of the 5000 to teach us. We must trust specifically in His sacrificial death for us. And faith to trust Him comes by His word.

Are you trusting in Christ and His death for eternal life? Or is your life still centred on satisfying those other desires and appetites we mentioned at the beginning. Many of those appetites are good and do need to be satisfied, but are we letting them obscure the most important appetite we should have: our need for eternal life and knowing God personally?

In vs26-29. Jesus told the crowd that He knew they followed Him only because they had their stomachs filled. Are we like the crowd only being interested in Jesus for help in this life, as if our physical needs are all there is? Let's be clear, Jesus really does help us when we go through tough times giving us inner strength and peace. This is because, for those who trust in Him, Jesus satisfies our deepest need to know God forever, and that He's with us forever.

So Jesus urged the crowd to look beyond their physical needs to their eternal need, saying "do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures for eternal life". And as v29 says, this means trusting in Jesus, the one God has sent.

Maybe you haven't really believed in Jesus yet, or are not sure. May I encourage you to keep coming each Sunday to hear God's word the Bible taught so that your faith can grow. Come to some of the mini-mission events on the week after this – and why not bring others so they too can have the chance to receive the bread of life. And why not bring others so they, too, have the chance to receive the bread of life. And after that, why not come to Life Explored Lent Course which explores what the Christian message has to say in today's world.

Let's pray.