

Matthew 14:13-14:21 Feeding of the 5000

I read something like this a few years back, I've just updated it: "A basketball in my hands is worth about £20. A basketball in Michael Jordan's hands is worth about £33 million. It depends whose hands it's in. A tennis racket is useless in my hands. A tennis racket in Andy Murray's hands is a potential Wimbledon Championship. It depends whose hands it's in. A rod in my hands will keep away a wild animal. A rod in Moses' hands will part the mighty sea. It depends whose hands it's in. A sling shot in my hands is a kid's toy. A sling shot in David's hand is a mighty weapon. It depends whose hands it's in. Two fish and 5 loaves of bread in my hands is a couple of fish sandwiches. Two fish and 5 loaves of bread in God's hands will feed thousands. It depends whose hands it's in."

Jesus' hands transformed everything he touched. A blind man once lived in a black vortex, but touched by Jesus' hands colour and movement flooded his life. A leper's body was diseased and rotting, he was covered with shame and no one would come near him out of fear — that is until Jesus touched the untouchable and his body was made whole and his relationships were restored. A widow's son died, and his death meant excruciating loss to her in every way. But as they carried the young man's body on a stretcher, taking it to a dark tomb while his soul was taking its place in the realm of the dead, Jesus' hands held him and he smiled at his mother as life pulsed through his body. The funeral procession stopped and a dance began. And in our Bible reading for today, Jesus' hands take common bread and a couple of fish, and as he touches it, it multiplies. He breaks the bread for all to see and eat. Before, the crowds could only stare at the few loaves and fish held, as they drooled with the thought of having a bite at

best. But there was not enough for 5,000 or even 50. (Actually, the number of those present was more like 15,000 or 20,000, because there were 5,000 men, not counting women and children. Women and children weren't important to most people, but Jesus wasn't most people.) Here was a God who was not looking down on the world trying to see what he could get from his subjects and control them, but a God who was genuinely touched by human need.

I was struck as I read this passage several times this week at how it begins. Jesus withdraws to a deserted place to be by himself. He has been pressed on every side for days, weeks and months. And it is worse than being pursued by paparazzi who only want to take a picture, because people are not only following him everywhere he goes, but everywhere there are outstretched hands, often grabbing hands, and pleading voices rising out of a sea of sorrow, sickness, pain and need. (There were no doctors or medicine, of course.) Everyone wanted something from him, and he had been giving to everyone who came. So now he has an opportunity to be by himself, to rest, to take a deep breath, to think and to pray. These are the kind of moments that busy people who are always around others fantasize about. No noise, no voices, no people, just to be alone for awhile. But as I began to read the next sentence again in the NRSV, I was struck by two words: "But when..." "But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. And it is followed by the words, "When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick" (Matthew 14:13-14). There is an interruption. The plan of getting away for some alone time has been sabotaged. The people are running along the shore as they keep an eye on the sail of Jesus' boat on Galilee. They followed him on land. He is off in his boat so he

can be alone, but they are not going to let that happen. Their needs are too great. As he lands, the people are already there waiting for him.

You might expect that he would be exasperated, but instead the Bible says, "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick." If it were most of us, we would have been irritated, but he had compassion. He put his needs aside and ministered to the needs of those around him. What he wanted did not come before what everyone else wanted. He was not self-centred, but centred on the needs of those he loved — people he did not even know personally.

And so, once again, he ministered to the people all day. He listened to them and healed them. He must have been exhausted. It was now evening. He is hungry and he knows the entire crowd is hungry. These are people who live near the edge of starvation. It is just how life was at that time. The disciples understand this and say to him: "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food." This would have been a great way to get rid of the crowds and have a little down time. No one would have questioned it. But again he has compassion on the people.

Jesus turns to his disciples and says to them, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." Can you imagine how startled the disciples were? They said, "We have nothing here but five loaves of bread and two fish." They lived in a small world of limited possibilities, but Jesus lived in a world of unlimited possibilities. They realized they had very limited resources, and the crowd had unlimited need. They

knew they had nothing to offer. But then Jesus, referring to the five loaves and two fish, said, "Bring them here to me." Now if we were reading this story for the first time, our hearts would begin to beat a little faster and our curiosity would peak as we would wonder what Jesus was going to do. What could he possibly be thinking? Who would have dreamed what he was about to do. Certainly not the disciples. Even in the very next chapter where Jesus feeds another 4,000 people, the disciples seem perplexed about what to do, for they say, "Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?" Where indeed!

But we are not any different from the disciples. We still see impossibilities when God is wanting us to see possibilities. We, like the disciples, need to see that the situation is not in our hands, but in His hands, and when they are in His hands everything changes. We look at our meagre resources and say to God: "But what are these among so many?" And he says to us, "Bring them here to me." He places his hands upon our pitiful resources and everything changes. This is the formula: We bring God our meagre offering and he places his hands on our small gift and causes it to grow thousands of times over. We never have the resources to meet people's needs. We have nothing, and all we can do is bring our nothing to Jesus and have him turn it into something. We only need to look around us to know the truth of those words.

And isn't it interesting how Jesus involves people in this miracle. He uses the bread and fish that somebody has bought, and He involves the disciples in giving out the food. The same thing happens when Jesus meets his disciples by the Sea of Galilee after his resurrection: He invites them to bring some of the fish they have caught that is, to contribute.

Let's use what we have, the little we have, in possessions and talents, and ask God to do something with them. So God knows our needs and wants to meet them. But it doesn't stop there. God doesn't offer to meet our needs just so we can sit at home, be free from worry, and be cosy. It's surely to free us up to do more for Him.

The miracle comes straight after Jesus hears about the death of John the Baptist. Jesus is trying to be on his own because He must have been sick with grief at John the Baptist's horrible death after Herod's drunken dinner party. Also, He'll have known that the same thing will happen to Him. It must have been maddening for Jesus when He is trying to get away to grieve for John to find himself surrounded by thousands of people clamouring for his attention. But He gets on and meets their needs. This is not a happy, relaxed summer's outing and picnic. There's an urgency, with corruption and evil around. And there is today too. God wants us to rely on Him so that we can get stuck in to doing something about all the problems that there are. As I said before, the disciples see the people's need but don't think they can do anything. God says, "I will meet your needs. So get up and do things for me." Just as Jesus involved the disciples, He's relying on us today. And they couldn't do anything on their own, but with Jesus they could. We too can't do things on our own, but with Jesus we can, ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE.

Let's get to it! AMEN