

Bible Reading: Matthew 14. 15 – 21 Picnic on the hillside

The disciples came to Jesus and said, “This place is like a desert, and it is already late. Let the crowds leave, so that they can go to the villages and buy some food.”

Jesus replied, “they don't have to leave, you give them something to eat.” But they said “We have only five small loaves and two fish” Jesus asked his disciples to bring the food to him, and he told the crowd to sit down on the grass. Jesus took the five loaves and the two fish. He looked up towards heaven and blessed the food. Then he broke the bread and handed it to his disciples, and they gave it to the people.

After everyone had eaten all they wanted, Jesus' disciples picked up twelve large baskets of leftovers.

There were about five thousand men who ate, not counting women and children.

“Matthew gives us five discourses
In threes and seven he likes his sources
He writes to tell what OT meant
with an ecclesiastic bent”

This piece of doggerel from the Lay preachers course I took over 60 years ago has remained with me and provides a useful starting point as we consider today's bible reading.

As with all the miracle stories, to speculate on “what actually happened” is to miss the point. There are several references here, for those who can spot them.

First there was grass – that is springtime, the season of Passover. Then “Jesus broke the bread” would remind the early Christians of what they did when they met together to celebrate the Eucharist or Holy Communion. The numbers are also significant. Five a “Jewish” number, reminder of the five books “of Moses” and twelve, the number of the tribes.

Bread was a symbol of the Word of God – Rabbis had already associated the manna given to the tribes in the wilderness with the word of God. A fish was a common sign by which Christians recognised each other, ICHTHUS the Greek word for fish used as an acrostic for “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour”

If we do not set such store by “magic” numbers today what is Matthew saying that is relevant to us in our own day?

We must not lose sight of symbol and allusion in the Gospel – a recognition of which is demanded by Jesus own criticism of the disciples failure to understand.

For the Gospel writers (and for us) the story is a demonstration of God's free, overwhelming generosity to his people.

The interpretation of Jesus feeding of the five thousand that comes closest to Christian experience is the one that seemed obvious to John and the early church.

All the strands of allusion are drawn together in Holy Communion:

“It is the present self-manifestation and self-giving of the one to whom Law and Prophets bore witness. Jesus still takes, blesses, breaks and gives bread to his people. It is the Christian Passover, celebrating and making present the redemption wrought for Israel at the Exodus.....in Holy communion we receive the eternal Word of God both in Scripture and in Sacrament.”

*Jeffrey John, Dean of St Albans: 'The meaning of the Miracles'

Prayer

Loving God, thank you that in our darkest time you are with us. That we find you in broken bread and poured out wine, and in the fellowship of believers, past, present and to come.

Make us aware of your presence in these days while we are without the physical presence of familiar fellow believers while we worship.

AMEN