

St Brandon's, Sermon for 6th August 2017
Matthew 14. 13-21 (Isaiah 55.1-5; Romans 9.1-5)
Disciple's Story of the feeding five thousand
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Hello, let me introduce myself, I'm one of Jesus's twelve disciples – the short, fat one, you know! I was asked to come along this morning to tell you more about this story you heard – the one about feeding the five thousand - because I was there, you see, and maybe I can just tell it a bit more from my perspective. It was a long time ago, so I may not be remembering absolutely accurately, and yet, in many ways, its still as clear as anything.

It all started the night before, really.

John the Baptist's disciples came bursting in while we were finishing our meal and told us the revolting details of how Herod had had John beheaded as some sort of 'reward' for his daughter. It was a dreadful blow to Jesus to hear how pointlessly and gruesomely his beloved cousin had been killed. They had always been close, both with this special relationship to God, (though John always maintained Jesus was the one sent by God, and he the messenger). Jesus had to hear every detail of the death, and where and how they had buried the body, they were talking long into the night.

I don't think Jesus slept all night, and at first light he left for the boat without a word. It was typical of him to want solitude - to be with his Father, he would say, to talk to God but this time we were a bit concerned for his safety. He had looked dreadful, and taken nothing by way of food or drink. We agreed among ourselves to stick some food in a bag go round the lake and up on the headland where we could see when he turned in. As we left, some of the villagers started to tag along, and word got out that Jesus had gone in the boat. When we reached the headland, we saw many people – men, women and children heading for the remote cove below us, where they would be able to see Jesus' boat if he was near enough to shore. It was quite a walk beyond the furthest village, and quite a rocky scramble but we could see a great crowd of them gathering on the shoreline.

We could see Jesus in the boat, his face turned up, motionless. The gathering crowd started to call to him and after a while, he weighed anchor and brought the boat in.

I saw his face as the boat approached: so pale and drawn.

He looked drained and weary, almost lost in his boat.

Someone held the boat and he splashed ashore, his eyes fixed on a man and woman holding a limp child, as he gazed at them he seemed to rally, reached forward and touched the child and spoke quietly to the couple. He was smiling. He moved to the next group, and the next, and with each his weariness seemed to fall away, and this peace and brightness grew in his face. On and on he worked: a word here, a hand placed there, or sometimes people handed him things, and all the time, more people arrived – there must have been 5,000 men, many with wives and children too.

Jesus worked on steadily, seemingly oblivious to time. Those whom he had talked with were animated, they watched his progress with excitement; those waiting did so with an increasing sense of anticipation and urgency, no-one, but no-one, wanted to go.

Eventually the shadows started to lengthen and a chilly fret come in and I just longed to be home, my bed was far away and I was faint from lack of food. I knew that we had those loaves and fish we had packed to eat with Jesus but I daren't get those out when no-one else had anything.

Then I began to get worried, there were too many to get safely over the rocks in the dark, some too old or frail, babies to be carried, it was really unsafe. Besides, nobody had expected to be out long, no-one had prepared.

Crossness got the better of me, and in fit of panic and hunger I wormed through the crowd to Jesus' side and confronted him -

“This is a rocky, difficult place, its getting really late, you must send them away so they can go and buy their own food in the villages”

Jesus looked at me – looked right into me – and said

“They need not go away: **you** give them something to eat.”

You could have knocked me down with a feather! It quite took my breath away. Of course I should have known he would be able to read me like a book. He could tell by looking at us that we had food in our bags alright, and not enough. Only enough to start a riot! So I told him,

“We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.”

He looked again at us, surveyed us with an expression that was fierce and friendly, and reassuring, all at the same time. He said “Bring them here to me.”

In an instance, I realised that Jesus was showing me something about myself:

that I was **so** fearful of the little I had that I daren't risk trying to use it – what good would so little do?

Worse – that I feared losing it all: there would be none left for me - and even –

“Why should I?”

It might be more than enough for me, but it was mine, no-one else had a right to it.

Then I remembered *why* I had it:

I had brought it from home for Jesus to eat, he had purchased it yesterday, I merely packed it in my bag so we could feed him and he would be fit to get home.

Now I realised these hungry folk were as important to Jesus as his life.

Not one of them mattered less to him so not one of them should matter less to me, FOR him.

In the wake of that realisation I had no defence. Jesus was like a magnet: both commanding us and inviting us, and we *had* to know what would come next, *had* to be part of this, had to submit to whatever was going to follow, so, of course, we started fumbling in our bags for the food.

Jesus **did** then order the crowds into action - but not to go home – he told them to sit down! And like a wave rippling out, they sat in their thousands on the coarse sea grass and a great hush fell on them.

We spread a cloak on the rocks by Jesus's feet and laid on it our five loaves and two fishes. A great sense of awe and sort of holy fear began to fill me. Jesus gathered us close to him, then looked up to heaven; he blessed the bread, holding it up to his Father in heaven. He broke the loaves and turning to us, distributed the chunks of bread between the twelve of us. Then he turned towards the seated thousands and gestured for us to go to them.

Without questioning, with all my doubts and fears suspended by this sense of energy and lightness, we moved amongst the crowd breaking off bits of bread and handing them to each eager hand. I'm not sure how it happened but we seemed always to have enough in our hands to break a bit more off, as if the more we gave away, the more we could give. Inside me, the weariness was long gone and I felt I could go on forever doing this. Suddenly I realised everyone had some. Some had a little left over, here and there. Someone offered me a basket to gather the bits, and intent on wasting none, I filled my basket with the surplus bread.

And Jesus was watching me.

I remember wondering where tomorrow I would take my basket. Some of the very sick and infirm hadn't come with the crowd, we would need to search them out, each with our basket; there would be work to be done tomorrow.

In the end, that night turned out to be cold and uncomfortable, and scary all over again, but that's another story.

Over the ensuing days, I came to realise the extraordinary scale of what Jesus had done, yet he had chosen not to do it himself but through us. He had made us realise first what pathetically little we had to give in the face of so much need, and how fearful we were of risk, then he showed us how in the power of God, that little could still be sufficient, if it was with his blessing, and our faith and trust.

We talked about it later, wondered at it. Not only the extraordinary way it multiplied but the way it lifted our weariness as we ministered to the crowd, just as Jesus' weariness and grief had been lifted by his enormous compassion for the crowds. Everything changed for us, as we made it change for others.

Months later, after everything had gone wrong, and Jesus had been cruelly crucified, we remembered that time on the beach. That was the first time we'd seen him break bread like that, but he did it very stately the night he was betrayed.

That was the last time we had supper together.

He took a loaf of bread, blessed it and broke it, when he handed us the broken bread he told us it was his body. I think he wanted us to realise that his body would somehow, in the breaking on the cross, become enough to satisfy the needs of all people everywhere, for all time. That

we could remember by breaking and sharing bread together, both that, and how he made our weakness and inadequacy: our five pathetic loaves, sufficient when we worked through him.

For now, the bread is sufficient, I keep going on in the strength of this blessed bread, like the manna that Moses' people managed with for forty years of wilderness until they reached the promised land. For we, too, will reach a promised land at the end of time when Jesus promises to come into his Kingdom. He used to talk to us about that Kingdom in stories about mustard plants, wheat and weeds, and seeds falling on rocky ground.

When he comes into his Kingdom, then we will no longer need the bread of his broken body and the wine of his spilt blood: all forgiveness will be achieved, all made whole and new, then what a heavenly banquet he told us to expect!

But first, and now, we have work to do: we are all furnished with something equivalent to a basket of blessed bread: fragments of possibilities and feeble gifts to take out into the world. God will strengthen us by the power of the Holy Spirit when we meet with those in need and share the abundance of what God has multiplied in us.

Thank you for letting me share my memories this morning,