

## Shared Meals

In 2013 I took Richard and Sophia to Israel for the first time. As part of this trip, we all swam in Lake Galilee and were part of a Jewish Seder meal. We received so much hospitality as part of that trip in people's homes and in restaurants we never went hungry. In fact, it was the opposite. Richard and Sophia will tell you what they most enjoyed about that trip and the many blessings we received as we were able to visit face to face the places where Jesus was born, grew up and lived as a young man and did his many miracles. I can still picture our trip to Lake Galilee where the feeding of the 5000 is likely to have taken place.

This is a far cry from speaking to priest colleagues in Israel today who have been worshipping with their congregations underground and whose families are not safe to work or go to university in neighbouring cities such as Haifa and Sidon in Northern Israel. Many neighbours in Gaza have been without food, water, shelter and medical care since the war started and one of the only hospitals still operating is the one run by the Anglican Church in the Diocese of Jerusalem.

This week the readings focus mostly on food, and more particularly on people eating together: a symbol of fellowship and togetherness, and a reminder of God's covenant with his people. If we had had Isaiah as our First Reading, he issues an invitation to such a meal: 'Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price ... I will make with you an everlasting covenant.' The Psalm, traditionally sung at mealtimes by the Israelites, praises the Lord for giving them fulfilling food. Even when he is tired and grieving the loss of John the Baptist, Jesus still shows compassion for the crowds who follow him

in Matthew's Gospel. He ensures that they can be fed, transforming the little that the disciples bring him into great abundance. This blessing and sharing of the loaves and fish by Jesus prefigures the meal we share in the Eucharist which we will share in together later on. We don't hear much about the sharing of the fish from Matthew but safe to say that fish was a staple and Jesus felt it was goof to be able to meet people in their workplaces and this included fishermen. He never expected people to come to him – he nearly always went to them. A lesson for us when we meet those who are not Christian in this villages at work or when we socialise or share hobbies.

This story occurs with slight variations in all four Gospels. This underlines the hospitality which Jews and early Christians shared in common. In St Matthew, it comes straight after the news that John the Baptist has been beheaded at the order of Herod. Matthew follows Mark's account very closely but differs in some important aspects: here there is an emphasis on Jesus's compassion for the people; the disciples are the ones who should provide food; and there are strong parallels between this event and the Last Supper, with the institution of the Eucharist (Matthew 26: 26–29). Matthew gives fewer details than Mark, increasing the symbolic significance of the story. This episode echoes several multiple feeding stories in the Old Testament: the manna that fed the Israelites in the desert (Exodus 16); the quails in the wilderness (Numbers 11: 31–35); Elijah and the widow at Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8–16); and Elisha, who fed a hundred people with two barley loaves (2 Kings 4: 42–44).

Jesus withdrew in a boat to a desolate place The exact location of this place is not identified. It was probably in the region of Bethsaida, close to the shores of the Sea of Galilee, not far from villages or towns where the crowd would have been able to buy food. We have only five loaves here and two fish. The food – five loaves and two fish

– which the disciples carried with them, would probably be enough to feed their own group. The loaves would likely be made of barley grain (wheat was reserved for the rich); while fish, a staple food at that time, could be dried, cured or salted, and was easily carried. He looked up to heaven and said the blessing Jesus blesses the food as in a traditional Jewish meal. However, his words are the same as those of the Last Supper: taking, blessing, breaking, giving. For us today, they are very much associated with the Eucharist. Those who ate were about five thousand- the size of the crowd may be inaccurate since oral tradition always tends to increase numbers. But it represents the whole of Israel, where the symbolism is reinforced by the remaining baskets, twelve being the number of the tribes of Israel.

As we receive and make our communion today let's ask ourselves What do I perceive to be my main need today? Am I hoping for some peace and quiet, to be healed, to be fed, to see this intriguing man Jesus in person? What is my own main need? Maybe I can recall a time when I needed to be fed, whether physically or spiritually, and someone unexpectedly came to me with the food I wanted. I give thanks for my helper. How far did it encourage me to cater for the needs of others, whether around me or further afield? Amen