

Focus Reading: Matthew 14:13-21 The Feeding of the 5000

Holy God open our ears to hear your word and know your voice. Speak to our hearts and strengthen our wills, that we may serve you today and always. Amen.

Prior to today's reading from the Gospel according to Matthew 14:13-21, Jesus had learned of the death of his cousin John the Baptist. On hearing such tragic news, Matthew tells us that Jesus needed some time out, so he withdrew to a deserted place by himself.

This is how Matthew recalls the events that subsequently unfolded.

Feeding the Five Thousand

¹³ Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷ They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸ And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Not discounting the miraculous nature of feeding more than 5000 people with five loaves and two fish, two aspects of this passage stand out for me.

- God, through Jesus meets humanity in our need.
- It was the disciples who distributed the food.

This passage begins with Jesus encountering a life crisis.

Here we have Jesus grieving the loss of a loved family member. The person who had been commissioned by God to 'declare the Way' for his coming. Jesus would have been desolate.

When we find ourselves in crisis, no matter what might trigger that crisis, our natural reaction is to look to our own needs. We recognise Jesus doing this when he chose to withdraw and go to a deserted place. However, seeing this crowd of people, Jesus quickly assessed the situation and realised there was something going on that was bigger than his grief. That doesn't mean he denied his grief, or his need for solitude, rather he looked for an alternative way to address the

greater need at the time. Jesus had more than five thousand people following him, wanting to hear what he had to say. They were there to discover for themselves if his words held a message for their lives.

In the previous chapter Jesus had been teaching his disciples about the Kingdom of Heaven. Two of the examples involved minute objects, a mustard seed, and yeast that have the power to multiply exponentially. This situation, a gathering of a multitude, allowed Jesus to move from theory to practise as he reached out with compassion and healing, transforming words into actions, meeting need at its core.

God, through Jesus met these people in their need.

The gospel records there were five thousand people, not including women and children. These people had intentionally followed Jesus, on foot, to hear what he had to say. The passage infers they travelled away from the town, and their homes, to a deserted place. Jesus had responded to their needs with compassion and healing. These people had encountered something that had touched their lives at a deep level, and as the day drew to an end there was a reticence to break up the gathering.

The disciples recognised that this enormous group of people needed food but were at a loss as to how to meet that need. So, they turn to Jesus. The people were listening to Jesus, so if he sent them home there was a likelihood that they would respond. The disciples suggested that he 'send the people home so that they may go into the villages and buy something to eat.'

Jesus knew that their need to gather with him, to receive from him, hadn't yet been satisfied. Rather than agreeing with the disciples, Jesus turns the tables. He is good at turning tables.' Jesus replied, 'you give them something to eat'. Nourish these people.

Can you imagine the response of the disciples?

How were five loaves and two fish going to feed the multitudes?

Once again, God, through Jesus met these people in their need. Jesus took this meagre offering of food, blessed it, broke it, gave it to his disciples and said 'share this' with all who are present.

Do these actions sound familiar?

...and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.'

- God, through Jesus met these people in their need.
- God, through Jesus, commissioned the disciples to share this food, to nourish the people, and there was a great abundance left over.

Of course, this got me thinking. What might 'feeding the multitudes' look like in today's world?

When we encounter crisis, our natural response is to look to our own needs first. As Christians, we have a faith and belief that takes us beyond ourselves. God, through Jesus, has met our needs and we have been commissioned to take the blessings we have received and share them with others.

As I reflect on Jesus' actions of 'take, bless, break and share' the words of a poem by Jan Richardson kept coming back to me.

AND THE TABLE WILL BE WIDE

*And the table will be wide.
And the welcome will be wide.
And the arms will open wide to gather us in.
And our hearts will open wide to receive.*

*And we will come as children who trust there is enough.
And we will come unhindered and free.
And our aching will be met with bread.
And our sorrow will be met with wine.*

*And we will open our hands to the feast without shame.
And we will turn toward each other without fear.
And we will give up our appetite for despair.
And we will taste and know of delight.*

*And we will become bread for a hungry world.
And we will become drink for those who thirst.
And the blessed will become the blessing.
And everywhere will be the feast.*

May your table be wide and your left overs abundant. Amen.