

Jesus Feeds Thousands – Matthew 14:13-21; 15:29-39

Bread

I love bread. I love multi-grain, sour dough, fluffy white bread, pita bread, Naan bread, Barbari bread, and a good old-fashioned knot roll. There is nothing like a nice bit of fresh hot bread. Now, while many of us love bread from the bakery, I think it is a bit hard for us to understand how important bread was for the people in Jesus' day. Bread was the simplest, easiest, most common food available. People ate bread every day because sometimes bread was all you had to eat. Remember, they did not have fridges and freezers. They did not have sealed packaging. You ate fruit and vegetables in their season and you couldn't always afford to buy meat. One of the few things you could store in the house was grain. All you had to do was ground the grain, add some water, and bake some simple flat bread just so that you could have something to eat. Bread was so important that it literally meant "food". Think of the Lord's Prayer. There is a line in the prayer that literally says, "Give us today our daily bread". This line is asking God to provide our basic need of daily food, which we do not think much about because food is plentiful and if we do not like bread or we are on a celiac diet, we do not have to eat it. But in Jesus' day, you ate bread every day, just to survive. And you thanked God for the smallest piece of simple flat bread. Today, we are looking at 2 stories which are remarkably similar – Jesus feeding the 5000 and Jesus feeding the 4000. In fact, these stories are so similar that some people believe they are the same story. But if they are the same story, why would Matthew include this same story twice? Besides which, Jesus said to his disciples in...

Matthew 16:9-11 *Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? ¹⁰ Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? ¹¹ How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread?*

Jesus, himself, mentions both stories as separate stories. So, Matthew did not make a mistake. He meant to include both of these stories and I think he used these 2 stories to make a very strong point.

The Death of John and Jesus' Compassion

The story of Jesus feeding the 5000 starts a new section in Matthew's Gospel. In Matthew 13, we read about Jesus speaking and teaching in parables. Then, in Matthew 14, we start a new section with Jesus doing some miracles and the first miracle is Jesus feeding the 5000. In between the parables and the miracles is the story of John the Baptist being beheaded. It is a gruesome story which happened on King Herod's birthday. King Herod was having a birthday feast with lots of important dinner guests. His daughter, Herodias, was entertaining them with her dancing when she was promised to be given anything she asked for. Herodias' mother told her to ask for John the Baptist's head on a plate and that is what she got. A birthday feast that ended with death. This is how Matthew transitions from one story to the next...

Matthew 14:12-13 *John's disciples came and took his body and buried it. Then they went and told Jesus. ¹³ When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place.*

Jesus wanted to get away from it all. I think we all know what that is like. There are times when we are grief stricken or life just gets too hard, especially with the death of a loved one. But John did not just die, he was killed in a vengeful way. The problem was that Jesus had become too famous, too well known. He may

have wanted to be alone, but the people followed him and caught up with him when he landed his boat. Now, if I was Jesus, I think I would have told them all to get lost! But I think that was part of the point. They were lost – spiritually. That is why they were chasing after Jesus. They were lost and they needed someone like Jesus to help them. So, Jesus did not get angry at them like I would have, Jesus had compassion on them, and he began healing the sick. Now, I think it is important to notice that Matthew does not talk about Jesus teaching the crowds like Mark and Luke do in their versions of this story. No, Matthew only tells us that Jesus healed the sick, he did miraculous healings, which is important, but we will come back to that later.

Feeding the 5000

Jesus got so busy healing people, that time just got away and soon it was late in the afternoon. That is when we have this strange conversation with the disciples. The disciples said to Jesus, “It is getting late, Jesus. Tell the people to go away. We are in the middle of nowhere and they will have to walk to the nearest village to buy food.” “You give them something to eat.”, said Jesus. Have you ever catered for a party of 50 or 100 people? There is a lot of work involved, even if all you do is have a BBQ. Not to mention how much it can cost in monetary terms. They were in the middle of nowhere, how were they going to buy food, or even find it, for more than 5000 people? It was an impossibility and the disciples knew it. That is why I think there is a touch of irony when the disciples said...

Matthew 14:17 “We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,” they answered.

That would hardly have fed the 12 disciples let alone the other 5000+ people. That is when Jesus took control. He told all the people to sit down on the grass. He said a blessing, or what we might call “grace”, thanking God for the food. Jesus then broke the bread, gave the pieces to the disciples, who then handed them out to the crowds of people and the people ate. They ate until they had their fill. In fact, there was an abundance of food. Not fancy, not rich food, but an abundance of the basic food people needed that night. There was so much food that there were leftovers. 12 baskets of leftovers. That is one basket for each disciple.

Comparing the Feedings

Now, if you compare the feeding of the 5000 to the feeding of the 4000, it really does look like the story is repeated. This time, Jesus went up a mountain and more than 4000 people followed him. Once again, Jesus healed the sick but this time we get a list of the kinds of illnesses Jesus healed. We also see the reaction of the crowds as Jesus healed people. In Matthew 15:31, we see the people were amazed and they gave glory to God for what Jesus had been doing. Once again, we are told that Jesus had compassion for the people. This time it was because they had been with him in the summer heat for 3 days and they had run out of things to eat. The disciples asked about where they were going to get enough bread to feed the people. This time they had more than before with 7 loaves of bread and a few small fish, and Jesus did the same miracle. He gave thanks to God for the bread, broke it, gave the pieces to the disciples who gave those pieces to the crowds of people who ate their fill. This time there were 7 large baskets of leftovers. Two stories, remarkably similar. There has to be a reason for including them, but what are those reasons? Some of the reasons come out of the context of the stories around these feedings, and other reasons may be picked up from within the stories themselves.

Two Kings, Two Feasts

I do not think it was a mistake that Matthew put the feeding of the 5000 straight after the death of John the Baptist. Like I said earlier, it is a gruesome story set at a banquet of the rich and powerful King of the Jews. The banquet was given by the king to celebrate himself, to celebrate his birthday. There was no “good” being done, no one was helped or healed, they were just enjoying their food, wine, and a bit of entertainment. Herod then made a promise that he did not know would be so costly. And a girl, Herod’s daughter, would ask for the head of a man, a godly man. Such a banquet, such a celebration, but it resulted in the death of John the Baptist because of the wishes of a young girl and her mother.

The story of Jesus feeding the 5000 is a contrast to Herod’s birthday celebration. Jesus was not out to celebrate, he wanted to be alone, but he had compassion on the people and began helping and healing them. By the end of the day, he had not only healed a great many people, he had provided those people with enough food to eat that there were even 12 baskets of leftovers. Jesus, the King of the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God, was a very different king to Herod, the earthly King of the Jews. Jesus was not having a party, he was helping the people. Jesus was not delivering the head of a godly man to a girl and her mother, he was performing healings and miracles which brought life back to people. Jesus was not filling his own mouth with rich food and wine, he was giving people the basic food they needed for that night. This story creates a contrast between the earthly King of the Jews and Jesus, who is the King of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Refusing to Believe

I also do not believe that the feeding of the 4000 is placed at the end of Matthew 15 by accident. But instead of looking at the story before it, you need to look at the story after it, at the beginning of chapter 16, to understand the context and the reason why Matthew included the story of Jesus feeding the 4000. Like I said earlier, the story of Jesus feeding the 4000 is remarkably similar to Jesus feeding the 5000. So, why would he add such a similar story. I think the clue is found in...

Matthew 15:30-31 *Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. ³¹ The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.*

In both feedings, Matthew tells us that Jesus healed many people. But in the second story, Matthew gave a detailed description of the kinds of healings that Jesus did. And notice how Matthew describes the reactions of those who saw those things. The people were amazed, they praised God. They saw what Jesus did and they believed. Just to prove that the feeding of the 5000 was no fluke, no accident, Jesus fed the 4000+ people who were there that day.

Matthew 16 begins with Jesus’ enemies, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, asking for a sign from heaven, presumably to prove that Jesus was a man from God, and possibly to prove that he was the King of the Kingdom of Heaven. I am not going to go into detail here because someone else will be preaching on Matthew 16 in a few weeks’ time. But I do think that Matthew is highlighting the deliberate ignorance of the Pharisees and Sadducees. They had seen some of Jesus’ miracles. Not all of them, of course, but I would expect that they

would have seen the miraculous healings Jesus had performed during those 3 days before he fed the 4000. It is highly likely that they had also seen the healings and the feeding of the 5000. They did not see these things just once, they saw these things a number of times, but still they refused to believe.

Distributing the Food

Lastly, I think there is an important detail within both feedings which help teach the disciples something they would have to remember. In both stories, the disciples knew that it was impossible for them to feed the great crowds of people. All they had on both occasions were a few slices or loaves of bread and some fish. It was not much more than a packed lunch. So, Jesus did the miracle of providing the food for the people. But I want you to notice how we are deliberately told that Jesus gave the disciples the broken pieces of bread and fish, and the disciples distributed the food to the people. Yes, the disciples fed the people, but they were feeding the food that Jesus provided.

Later on, after Jesus had ascended into heaven and the disciples were leading the early church, they would need to feed the people spiritually. They would be bringing the good news of Jesus to people and people would be fed by that word. Clive and I have been going to the different Growth Groups and have been trying to encourage people with some outreach training. Some people have said to us that they find it hard to help people understand the Good News of Jesus, that they cannot do it, but one of the things we can learn from this passage is that the message does not come from us, it comes from Jesus. The focus is not meant to be on what we can or cannot do, the focus is meant to be on Jesus and how he can feed us spiritually. The encouraging thing is that we only have to distribute the message, we only have to pass it on. It is the message of Jesus that saves people, not us. So, if it is the message of Jesus that we pass on, one of the simplest things we can do is read the Bible with people. Just start by reading Matthew's Gospel together. And if you want some support, speak to Clive, Cassie or myself and we will be only too happy to encourage you.

Conclusion

Well, there you have it. Two miraculous feedings that sound exactly the same. From those feedings we learn that Jesus is a far superior King of the Jews because he is the rightful King of the Kingdom of Heaven. We learn that Jesus used miraculous signs to show that he was the Promised King and while many believed, there were also others who refused to acknowledge the signs or believe in Jesus. We also learnt that just as the disciples had to distribute the food, so too do we have to be willing to distribute the message of Jesus. The disciples played an active part in the feeding miracles, we too can play an active part in God's work of bringing people the message of forgiveness and salvation in Jesus. It is not as hard as it seems. We feed them with the Word of God, it is the Spirit of Jesus who works in their lives.