

Sunday 2 August 2026

Trinity 9

Hymns

520/399 The old Rugged Cross

649/484 The King of love

387/299 Let us break bread together

299/222 I am the bread of life

252/188 Guide me O thou great redeemer

Sermon

Once again this week we have a very familiar story of a famous miracle. Sometimes, it is tempting to think we know the story so well that we think there is nothing more we can learn from it, but I wonder whether we can?

If we start by looking at what happens just before this event, we see that Matthew tells us of the death of John the Baptist. He tells us of the

banquet that Herod has thrown for the rich and powerful in his court. It is a lavish affair with a great variety of food and wine, and entertainment is provided by a young woman sent out by her mother to titillate the guests. Herod's reward for what she does is to offer her anything she wants, and, guided by her mother, she asks for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. An obscene thing to ask for.

By contrast, Jesus' feast takes place on a deserted hillside, in the evening or late afternoon. It is a feast for ordinary people, who do not have very much, but who are there to see Jesus and hear what he has to say. They are there so that he can heal those who are sick in body. There is no entertainment, just teaching and conversation. And the reward is food and healing from Jesus.

Two banquets. One gluttonous and transactional, with lust and murder at its core. One simple and relational with teaching, healing and love at its core.

As the story of the feeding of the 5000 opens, we see Jesus, having just learned of John's death, trying to get away on his own to a quiet place where he can pray and be with God. He goes, as he always does, to the wilderness, where he is less likely to encounter people, as there is little to draw them there. But, as usual, people are so desperate to be near him, to hear his word, to have him heal them, that they follow him out to this lonely place. Can you imagine his frustration?

But Jesus doesn't send them away – he has pity on them. He heals the sick and sits down to talk with them. No-one seems to notice that time is passing and that people may need food, water, rest. Except for the disciples, who are worrying about people's material needs while Jesus is dealing with their spiritual needs. The crowds don't seem to be bothered that it's late, or that they have no food or water. They are content being with the man who says he is the bread of life and the living water.

Jesus, however, turns the disciples' concern for the people into a teaching exercise. If they are worried about the people not having food then *they* should feed them. Jesus doesn't see the need to disperse the crowd yet: the disciples can feed the people. Of course, the disciples are utterly bewildered as they cannot see how they might possibly feed all these people. So Jesus tries to teach them by questioning and then demonstrating. He discovers that the disciples have managed to find five loaves and two fish, but they still cannot understand h that is enough to feed all the people there. Remember that, when we talk about the five thousand, we mean five thousand MEN. There are women and children there, too. So the true number of people fed is probably closer to twenty thousand.

Jesus demonstrates to the disciples how simple it is to perform the miracle. After all, he is expecting them to be able to do this kind of thing once he has gone. That's why he tells them 'You do it'. So he shows them that all they have to do is ask God

to help them. He takes the food, looks up to heaven, just as we do with the bread and wine at the eucharist, and he blesses the food. Then he breaks it into pieces and tells the disciples to distribute it. They must surely be puzzled by this: has Jesus gone mad? Distribute this tiny bit of food to all those people? But they do as they are told, because they are obedient disciples and trust Jesus. And there it is: everyone eats as much as they want and there is a lot left over!

Isn't this typical of God/Jesus? He feeds and nourishes simply with the good things in life. He doesn't go overboard with exotic foods and excess drink, as Herod does. He gives us what we need. Bread and protein. He meets our material needs and our spiritual needs quietly, without fuss, and out of an abundance of love. He is struggling to come to terms with the gruesome death of his cousin, but puts the needs of others before his own.

Interestingly, we don't hear what the crowd's response to this generosity is. Largely because it

is irrelevant to the point that Matthew is making, but also, I suggest, because it mirrors how we respond to God's generosity: we take it for granted and forget to respond to it.

Once the crowd has been fed and dispersed, Jesus is free to continue what he had planned to do before they turned up. The next time we see him, he is in a boat heading for somewhere he can be alone. He has done his duty to others before meeting his own needs. But note that he does actually go and do what he needs to do.

So yes: this story is certainly about food and the transformation of a little into a great deal. But we can understand it as more about how Jesus gives in abundance. How he feeds us literally as well as metaphorically. How he draws God into the miracle of feeding, because he can do nothing without God. It's about how he teaches, and about how he draws people to him. And it's about putting others' needs before his own. As always, the miracle is a vehicle for teaching.