

## **Matthew 14:13-21 Feeding of the five thousand**

One Sunday Morning a Vicar forgot the notes for his sermon, so in the middle of the sermon he got a few of the facts a bit twisted. He said that the Lord took 4000 loaves and 6000 fish and with them fed 24 people, and had plenty left over.

Suddenly someone in the congregation called out, "Anybody could do that!"

"Could you?", asked the vicar.

"I certainly could", replied the man.

After the service the vicar complained about the heckler's conduct, but he was told of his error by the curate. "Well, next week I'll remember my notes and I'll sort out that man!" he said.

The next week, with notes in his hand the vicar stepped up confidently to deliver his sermon. During the sermon he brought up again the miracle of the loaves and fishes. He told how five loaves and two fish had probably fed as many as 24,000 people. Thinking he'd get one over on the heckler from the previous Sunday he pointed to him and asked, "Could you do that?"

"Of course I could!", claimed the heckler.

"And just how would you do that?" asked the vicar.

The heckler replied, "With all the loaves and fishes left over from last Sunday!"

### **Intro**

Over the past few weeks, our Gospel readings have been concentrating on the middle section of Matthew's Gospel. It's an interesting section because of the way Matthew has written and

recorded the events. Over the past few weeks, you'll recall we've been looking at a series of parables. The parable of the sower, the parable of the weeds, the parable of the mustard seed, the parable of the yeast, the hidden treasure, the precious pearl, and then last week you may remember Bryony preached on the parable of the fishing net.

All of these parables are all together in this one section of Matthew's Gospel and they are all about the same thing, the Kingdom of heaven, and Matthew introduces each parable with the same phrase, "The Kingdom of heaven is like this..." So, the Kingdom of heaven is like, a man who sows seeds, a field of wheat and weeds, it's like a mustard seed or some yeast. It's also like hidden treasure, a precious pearl and a fishing net. With all those different analogies of what the Kingdom of heaven is like, we get this huge array of different images and metaphors bombarding us and all piling on top of one another. It's obvious Matthew is trying his best to hammer home a point, because it is only Matthew's Gospel which has this collection of parables together in one section. So, we have to ask ourselves why has Matthew chosen to do that, why has he put all these parables together and tried to hammer home this point of what God's kingdom is like?

## **Jewish**

Well, I've said before, we know for sure Matthew is writing for the Jewish community, the established community, the community which has become institutionalised and perhaps set in their ways and understanding, perhaps the community where they think they have got everything sorted out, the community who already think they know what God's Kingdom is like. We know that some people in this established Jewish community were certain and convinced they knew what God's Kingdom was all about. The Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, were certain of God's Kingdom and they were certain it was exclusive and who was or who wasn't part of it. And time and time again Jesus fiercely riled against their teaching and preconceived ideas, he turned their expectations upside down. So, Matthews' making a point here in the middle of his Gospel about God's Kingdom and all of this was whilst Jesus was sat in a boat speaking to the large crowd.

Then we have a short break in Matthew's Gospel where Jesus goes back to Nazareth where he is rejected and then the news of the death of John the Baptist. The chronology and location in this part of the Gospel is a bit poor, because when Jesus hears the news of John's death, Matthew tells us he goes off in a boat, but doesn't bother to tell us where from, it's certainly not from Nazareth. Luke

tells us it's from Bethsaida on lake Galilee. Now, keeping all of what I've said so far in mind, we then get to our Gospel reading today, the telling of the feeding of the five thousand.

## **Five thousand**

For some reason people hear Jesus has gone off, but they want to hear more from him and so a large crowd gathers and Jesus begins to heal the sick, and continues teaching them. The next bit I think is really interesting. We are told, it's already getting late and by this time the disciples are getting a bit fed-up with this crowd, so they come and ask Jesus to send them away, and one of the best excuses they can come up with is that there's nothing to eat. Anyway, Jesus is having none of it and he throws the problem back at the disciples. "You yourselves give them something to eat!" he says. As a church leader, I think it's one of the best examples of leadership delegation and empowerment in the Bible ever.

It's the disciples that are getting fed-up with the crowds, it's them that come to Jesus to ask him to send them away, and all of this in Matthew's Gospel comes just after Jesus has been teaching about the inclusivity of God's Kingdom in all those parables. The disciples don't get it and I think this is Jesus using the opportunity to teach them a bit more about God's Kingdom. The reply, "You give them

something to eat!" is Jesus challenging the disciples to think about God's Kingdom in a practical way, in a way which will teach them a lesson. Of course the instruction is absurd, how on earth were the disciples going to feed all those people, especially when all they've got is not much more than a picnic for 3. The rest of the story goes on to teach that there actually was no way on earth they were going to feed five thousand with five loaves and two fish, but it was only by heavenly intervention they would be able to achieve it.

### **Church**

I think the way Matthew presents the story of the feeding of the five thousand and this idea of what God's kingdom is like, can perhaps teach us something about what we might be like as a church. Sometimes when we come to church we become comfortable and familiar with what's going on, we like it how it is. We like the way we do things and sometimes we refer back to the times when perhaps times seemed better and more people did come to church. Perhaps we've become like the established Jewish community, who Matthew is writing his Gospel for, perhaps the community where they are a bit set in their ways and think they have got everything sorted out.

But then there's a problem because there are all these people and they get to hear some good things about Jesus, and see one or two

good things going on. But then all of that takes us out of our comfort zone and it starts to bring new challenges, and it might make us feel a bit uncomfortable and inconvenient. So we ask those in charge, "What are you going to do about it?" But then the challenge comes back, "You feed them!" and perhaps that's when we start to panic, because that really does take us outside of our comfort zones, it seems that we don't have enough resources, it seems that we are already stretched to the limit with our time and our energy. Yet look at that story of the feeding of the five thousand. Through God's Spirit, Jesus takes those small resources and he makes sure that everyone is catered for and not only that, Jesus shows us God's sheer abundant generosity by providing more than enough for everybody's needs.

### **Inclusive**

Just as Bryony was suggesting last week about God's inclusive Kingdom. This miracle shows us that Jesus was generous and inclusive about who he believed could be part of God's kingdom. We know that there were many more than five thousand on that day and not one of them was excluded. But as I've suggested Jesus was not just feeding a hungry crowd, he was teaching the disciples a lesson by showing that all were welcome into the Kingdom of God and that leaves us with a challenge too.

What does the Kingdom of God look like in Oakworth and Newsholme? Are we inclusive like Jesus or exclusive like the Pharisees? Are we looking for the opportunities to show what God's Kingdom is like, or do we find it all a bit inconvenient when we are asked to step outside our comfort zones? Are you ready to be challenged, to think about how you might feed those who are hungry and want to know more about God's Kingdom or is that just a step too far? Are we prepared to offer those small resources we have, our precious time and energy, to let God's Spirit use them in a way we thought was impossible? And are we prepared to be challenged, to embrace change and to make it easier for new people to feel welcome and included, just as Jesus was teaching about in what God's Kingdom is like?

I really do feel that's where we are at the moment as a church, on the edge of something new, something different, which will both encourage and challenge us all in demonstrating what God's Kingdom is like here in Oakworth and Newsholme. But we must be ready to meet the challenge, even though it may look like an impossible job. May Christ help us to follow his example so that the unconditional love demonstrated to thousands of people through those five loaves and two fish may be made known through us too!