

St Peter De Beauvoir

The Eighth Sunday after Trinity – 25 July 2021

John 6:1-21

Even in an era where I suspect all of us are concerned that the story of Jesus's life isn't as well known as we would like it to be, there are some stories related to him that remain well known and loved, even beyond church circles. The Feeding of the Five Thousand, praise God, is one of those stories. Perhaps that's because it is just such a lovely story. Jesus is there with his disciples. Philip and Andrew are named amongst them. And there's a child with five loaves and two fishes, and there are five thousand hungry mouths to feed. Jesus gives thanks for the bread and the fish and the distribution begins. And it's as if the more it is shared, the more food there is. All are satisfied we're told, and even at that point twelve baskets are filled from the fragments left over. What's not to like about such a beautiful story. No surprise, perhaps, that it has lodged itself in our corporate imagination.

Today I'd like to take a fresh look at this well known story from the Bible and I'd like to try and make some connections with this particular moment in the life of this wonderful parish.

Perhaps another reason why the story is well known is that it appears in all four gospels. Today we listen to John's account. John's gospel is famously elegantly constructed, and famously theological. By that I simply mean that the things John chooses to include teach us things about God, about who Jesus is, about the gospel, about faith. It's very often the case that the detail included is there for a reason.

I'd like to pick out just one aspect of this in relation to the Feeding of the Five Thousand – and it's about John inviting us to see Jesus fulfilling the past and anticipating the future, about giving us a story that points both backwards and forwards.

In what sense does the story point backwards? Well for a start we're told that it takes place when the Passover festival was near. Here's a prime example of a detail that's there for a reason. Every Passover festival remembers the moment when God liberated the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt, and led them through the wilderness to freedom in the promised land. Jesus asks Philip: 'where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' just as Moses had wondered in the Book of Numbers, 'where am I to get meat to give all these people?'. The whole story reminds us of the miraculous feeding of the children of Israel in the wilderness with manna, the bread of heaven.

And there are all sorts of other connections between the feeding of the five thousand with other Old Testament stories. Our first reading is a great example. A man brings Elisha twenty loaves and some fresh ears of grain. On this occasion a hundred are fed, and once again there are leftovers. On another occasion Elisha multiplies the oil that belongs to a widow. Elijah ensures that a jar of meal and a jug of oil is repeatedly refilled for the widow of Zarephath.

What's John trying to teach us by making these connections that look backwards? He's teaching us that Jesus is like a new Moses, that he offers liberation, freedom - from the forces of evil and oppression. And Jesus is also the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, the prophecy of Elijah and Elisha, he is the prophetic Word made flesh, he brings the kingdom of God near.

And how does the Feeding of the Five Thousand point us forwards? After they've been fed, the people say that Jesus is indeed 'the prophet who is to come into the world'. The book of Deuteronomy spoke of the anointed one whom God will raise up at the end of time. Jesus feeds the five thousand on a mountain just as Isaiah once prophesied that 'on this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food'. And there are connections with Eucharist, the Communion service. Jesus takes the loaves, gives thanks, and distributes them, just as we are about to do at our Eucharist. John's gospel doesn't give an account of the Last Supper, instead we're given an account of the foot washing. John seems to use the

Feeding of the Five Thousand as his Eucharist story. At every Eucharist connections are made back to the Passover where bread and wine are also shared, but ever Eucharist also looks forward, as we do today, to the heavenly banquet, the banquet referred to many times in Jesus's teaching, the Marriage Supper of the Lamb in the Book of Revelation, true fellowship in the presence of God, of which the best of our shared parish meals or get-togethers, the best meals we've experienced are a wonderful foretaste.

So we have a famous Bible story, the Feeding of the Five Thousand, and delving just a little beneath the surface we can see how John invites us to make connections that point backwards and forwards - to Moses and the Prophets, and to the Heavenly Banquet.

It strikes me that for St Peter's this is also a moment when you may find your hearts and minds facing in two directions. Your Vicar Julia has retired and you await the arrival of a new Vicar. I have such fond memories of Julia and of her predecessor Andy, two wonderful Stepney Area clergy. And I certainly don't want to get all clerical about this. A few months ago I was standing here for the funeral of Amanda Davies. I give thanks today for her life, and for the lives of *all* who have served the parish so faithfully since the church was built in 1841. Generation upon generation who kept faith alive in this place. And I give thanks for all of *you* who have worked tirelessly during the interregnum to keep church-life going, to keep alive your witness to the love to God in this neighbourhood.

And it's also a moment for looking forward as you await the announcement of who your new Vicar will be, and as we as a country begin cautiously to look forward after an extraordinary and demanding year and a half. This will be a new and exciting phase in the life of the church, a time to dream some new dreams, a time to be especially attentive to what God is leading you towards in this place.

When Jesus feeds the five thousand he recalls his father's work, rescuing the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, feeding them with the bread of heaven and leading them to safety in the promised land. He recalls the work of the prophets who could also make bread and oil go a great deal further than anyone would have imagined. And he points forward as he takes the loaves, gives thanks, and shares them with the people to every Eucharist that ever was, and to the heavenly banquet that awaits us. It's the same God at work: past, present and future. This is our God who feeds us our daily bread and, out of love for us, gives us not just enough, but more than enough. There are baskets left over. This is the God of our ancestors and of our future, the God who *also* promises to be with us in this sacred present-moment, as we gather in his name - and break bread together. Amen.

The Revd Andrew Wilson