



Mark 6:30-44
**The Feeding of the
5.000**



In Mark 6:30, we find Jesus reunited with the Twelve, who are returning after their first mission on his behalf (see Mark 6:6b-13). But Jesus himself is coming to terms with the death of his cousin John the Baptist at the hands of Herod (see Mark 6:14-29). There is lots to catch up on, lots to come to terms with, which perhaps explains Jesus' desire to be on his own with the disciples for a time of rest.

Yet there is no escaping the demands of the crowds who recognise and follow Jesus. Mark tells us that Jesus felt compassion on them, 'because they were like sheep without a shepherd.' This phrase would have been recognised by Mark's first readers as a coded way of suggesting that the people of Israel were suffering from a lack of care and leadership. This language is used to describe the needy state of Israel facing the death of Moses (Numbers 27:17) and Ahab's army after his death in battle (1 Kings 22:17). One of the idealised images of the King in Israel was that of a shepherd figure like David (see Psalm 78:70-72). Could it be that Mark is drawing our attention to the corrupt leadership of Herod, who has just executed John the Baptist at the end of a debauched party at his palace?

Mark tells us that Jesus 'began to teach them many things' but by the end of the disciples draw his attention to a problem, the fact that it's late and that people need to be sent away so they can get some food. But Jesus looks to the disciples to come up with a solution: "You give them something to eat." By now it seems that this story is falling into a pattern which is becoming increasingly familiar in Mark, with the followers of Jesus failing to understand what he wants them to do. But it is hard not to feel some sympathy for the perplexed disciples who point out that the cost of feeding such a large crowd would amount to 200 denarii (more than half a year's wages).

The disciples are then sent off to see what resources they can pull together. Mark does not report the detail found in John's account, that the five loaves and two fish belong to a young boy (see John 6:9). Jesus then organises the crowd into groups of fifty or a hundred, a practice which some scholars see as echoing the organisation of Israel by Moses in the desert (see Exodus 18:21).

The astonishing miracle which follows is seen by many as an act which places Jesus in the same tradition as other great prophetic leaders of Israel. Comparisons have been drawn to Moses, used by God to supervise Israel in the story of manna in the wilderness (see Exodus 16), and the account of 2 Kings 4:42-44, where we read of Elisha feeding a hundred people with only twenty loaves of barley. However, these historical references should not distract us from the true wonder of this story, Jesus' astonishing multiplication of such a small amount of food.

We can learn not only from this incredible demonstration of Jesus' power over the natural order, but also from the fact that this is still a miracle achieved using natural resources, and using the disciples. 'Jesus reminds them that they can meet any emergency which is not of their own making... by the use of what they have, though it is totally inadequate, if only it is first offered in totality to Jesus to be used by Him.'¹

¹ RA Cole, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Mark*, 176-7

Another remarkable aspect of this story is the way in which this impromptu picnic is so different to the normal practices of 1st century Palestine. One expert has commented that: 'It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of table fellowship for the cultures of the Mediterranean basin in the first century of our era... Even everyday mealtimes were highly complex events in which social values, boundaries, statuses and hierarchies were reinforced. Anyone who challenged these rankings and boundaries would be judged to have acted dishonourably, a serious charge in cultures based on the values of honour and shame. Transgressing these customs consistently would make a person an enemy of social stability.'² This radical feast provides a picture of the new values of the kingdom, where everyone sits down together and where, Mark tells us, 'all ate and were filled' (Mark 6:42).

For discussion

1. A short boat trip is the only time Jesus and the disciples have to themselves, before the crowds again catch up with them. What can we learn from the way Jesus responds to the interruption of his break?
2. How does the leadership (shepherding) Jesus provides contrast with the kind of leader we see Herod to be in the previous story?
3. What can we learn from the suggestion made by the disciples that the crowds be sent away, and Jesus' response to them?
4. One New Testament expert, David Garland, has written that, 'This incident also emphasises the need to combine teaching with social concern. As God did not neglect the physical and spiritual needs of the people of Israel in the desert, so the church cannot neglect either need.' Do you agree?
5. Can you think of an occasion when you have seen God use meagre resources to meet a challenging situation?
6. In what ways do you think the feeding of the 5,000 can be regarded as a meal which teaches us about the values of the kingdom of God? Do any of the issues raised by this question make you think differently about Communion?

For further reflection

'What we offer to Jesus, Jesus offers to God with thanksgiving (*eucharist* means thanksgiving). He doesn't examine it for flaws, doesn't evaluate and appraise it, criticise or reject our offerings. "Two fish? Is that all you could come up with?" We can't imagine Jesus saying anything like that. He prays these offerings and the lives that back them up, offering what we offer to the Father.'

Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*

A task for the week ahead

Birmingham Central Foodbank is a charity based at Birmingham Christian Centre, which expresses the love of God through the provision of food parcels to those who are financially struggling. You can find out information about their work, and ways of supporting them at <http://birminghamcentral.foodbank.org.uk/donate>. If you want to collect food as a housegroup, please contact Trevor, so we can arrange a co-ordinated delivery of food.

² SS Bartchy in *IVP Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 796