

**“FOLLOWING THE KING - 41”**  
*Matthew 14:13-21*

This story is probably one of the best known of Jesus’ miracles. It is the only miracle which is mentioned in all four gospels and it seems to come at the climax of Jesus’ public ministry as he gets ready to begin the long journey to Jerusalem and the destiny which awaits him there. But this is a story – like so many others in the Bible – that it is possible to read on a number of different levels. I’m not going to look at all those possibilities this morning – and we’re not really going to delve into the accounts of the other evangelists either, because they all bring a different perspective to bear on this episode. There’s basically one point which I want us to grasp from this; something which I hope will be an encouragement to us all as we think about the ways in which are called to follow the Kingly Messiah.

Jesus and his disciples have been at his home town of Nazareth, where Jesus has preached in the synagogue to a fairly mixed reception. The people were amazed at his wisdom and authority, but also very hostile to this local boy made good who seems to be saying and doing things they’re not too keen about. We then had the little interlude about Herod and his execution of John the Baptist and we pick up the story of Jesus as he tried to get a bit of peace and quiet by sailing away “*to a solitary place*”.

Of course, word spreads around that Jesus is around and the usual crowds begin to gather. Just as he is really looking forward to a break from the people, they all turn up on the doorstep wanting to hear from Jesus and to be healed of their various ills. It would be natural for Jesus to feel a bit put out by all this. I expect his followers today would have switched on the answering machine and gone to bed, or replied fairly curtly that they’d only just got back from a preaching trip and were feeling in need of a bit of peace and quiet, thank you very much! But Matthew tells us that Jesus “*had compassion on them*” and continued the task of preaching and healing. The Master was never too busy or too preoccupied to help those who needed him. This really is the human image of the God who never slumbers nor sleeps. We can always be sure that Jesus is there, ready to help us, even if no-one else is: an encouraging point, but not the main one.

The people must have been eager for as much as possible of Jesus’ presence, because they were still there “*as evening approached*”. The disciples are a bit concerned about the crowd, thinking that they might have a few cases of exhaustion on their hands if they don’t get some food quickly, so they suggest to Jesus that he dismisses the crowds for a bit and lets them go off to find something to eat in the neighbouring villages. That would seem to you and me to be a fairly sensible response, wouldn’t it? After all, that takes the responsibility for doing something about the situation off the disciples and would give them a couple of hours break from the crowd.

Jesus, though, makes them face up to the situation with seriousness. “*You give them something to eat,*” he says. Come on, apply your brains to it – what are you going to do? Once again, they look at the possibilities with a certain amount of dull practicality. Well, all they have to offer is a few loaves stuffed with fish from the lake. That won’t go very far! Just imagine for a moment that you are at Spring Harvest or Keswick. The preacher’s gone on a bit longer than anticipated and all the food outlets are closed. Everyone’s getting a bit restless and hungry and no-one is quite sure what to do – after all, they came in at 9 o’clock this morning and the preaching and worship was so enthralling (some of you are now thinking, “Oh that must be Spring Harvest then”, and others are thinking “Oh that must be Keswick!”), that it’s now turned 10 o’clock at night. Then some bright spark on the platform says, “Well, I’ve got a couple of tuna sandwiches, if that’s any good.” You would rightly laugh the poor man to scorn. And the disciples must have felt the same way here. It wasn’t really any good at all – after all, there are “*five thousand men, besides women and children*”: we’re looking at a pretty big crowd.

Jesus doesn’t bat an eyelid. He tells the disciples to go round and tell the people to sit down (in groups of fifty or so, according to the other gospels). That would really have put the wind up them, because the people would now actually be expecting something to happen. They could have bluffed their way out of it if no-one had said anything, but now Jesus has told them to do something that would increase the level of anticipation among the crowd. I don’t know if you’ve ever been in that kind of situation – you’re going round organising something without the faintest idea of how you’re going to carry it out. It’s scary, isn’t it?

But I don’t think Jesus is here testing the disciples’ faith. He is simply taking control. He knows what he is doing and the disciples have to believe that. They are struggling with the fact of their own inadequacy: what they have just is not equal to the task before them. Feeding upwards of ten thousand people with a couple of sandwiches is a prospect too horrifying to contemplate.

Anyway, everyone is sitting down. There may well have been a hush of anticipation and very probably a few hostile glances at the disciples. I expect questions were asked and murmurings were heard. But Jesus takes the bread and the fish – all that he has to work with, that which has been given but which seems totally unequal to the needs of the situation – and looks up to heaven. I wonder why Matthew includes that observation – “*he looked up to heaven.*” I reckon Jesus was making very clear to everyone just what he was doing. Even those who could not hear his prayer could see that he was turning his eyes to his Father, to the God who was able to provide. Jesus wanted it made clear that something special was about to happen and God was going to be a part of it.

Then he gave thanks and started breaking bits off the bread and fish. In his Gospel John makes a very real connection here between this action and the Last Supper, but the other three evangelists just deal with the practicalities. Jesus broke it up and passed it around via his disciples. Having thanked God for what had been provided, he just got on with it, as if it was the most natural thing in the world to feed a crowd the size of a small town with the contents of a single lunch-box. And, of course, for Jesus it was the most natural thing in the world. He is the Kingly Messiah – this is part of his way of giving people a glimpse of life in the Kingdom of God.

But this occasion also has a kind of timeless dimension to it. There are interesting echoes here of other situations which might have rung some bells – albeit perhaps rather faintly – in the minds of those who were there and those who read about it later on. The idea that Jesus should be providing food seemingly from nowhere for these people out in the middle of the countryside looks back both to Moses and the experience of the people of Israel in the desert on their way out of Egypt, and to Elisha who miraculously provided food for a hundred prophets in *2 Kings 4:42-44*.

*A man came from Baal Shalishah, bringing the man of God twenty loaves of barley bread baked from the first ripe grain, along with some heads of new grain. “Give it to the people to eat,” Elisha said.*

*“How can I set this before a hundred men?” his servant asked.*

*But Elisha answered, “Give it to the people to eat. For this is what the Lord says: ‘They will eat and have some left over.’” Then he set it before them, and they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the Lord.*

In a sense, then, Jesus is continuing the work of *“the Law and the Prophets”*, the tradition of the people of Israel, the tradition of Matthew’s first church members who were so anxious about whether following Jesus would betray their heritage. But this looks forward, too, to the feasting of the Kingdom of God on the *“Day of the Lord”*. In a way, this is a reminder of the timelessness of God’s provision for his people.

Anyway, the food is passed around and everyone has enough. In fact, there is so much that the disciples picked up twelve baskets full of leftovers. (Where the baskets came from is another matter entirely!) Now, people have explained this miracle away in all kinds of ways. One person producing their lunch and sharing it encouraged all the others to get theirs out and share, is the favourite explanation. If the loaves and fishes looked like Erik’s lunchbox used to after a whole day in his bag, then it’s quite possible that the sight of them put the people off so much that they just weren’t hungry any more! Anyway, I believe that this was, indeed, a miracle and that, in the miracle, God is trying to say something very simple and yet very profound to his people today.

What the disciples had – the loaves and the fishes – seemed totally inadequate. They could not see for one moment how Jesus could use them to resolve this problem. They had their own ideas, but they

weren't really workable. The people would have swamped the nearby towns and caused even more chaos, and the disciples certainly didn't have enough money to nip off and buy enough food to distribute. In the end, they had to offer to Jesus what little they had and allow him to use it as he wished. As he blessed the offering of the food, so it was used to great effect and the needs of the crowd were more than met.

You and I really seem to have nothing to offer to meet the needs of the community around us. Our resources – material, emotional, intellectual, spiritual – can seem totally inadequate. What can we offer that can even begin to touch the lives of others? Well, even that little that we have can be taken by Jesus, blessed, and used by him to reach out and meet needs. We need not feel embarrassed that we feel we have nothing to give – we all have something which can be used by Jesus. We all have some gift which can be taken and transformed by the blessing of Christ – if only we are prepared to offer it. To continue the food theme, tins of beans and packets of cereal – nothing much of themselves – can be used to meet the needs of men and women in crisis situations here in Lichfield, via the foodbank. Those few pounds that you put in the TEAR Fund box can transform the lives of the poor in other countries. That odd word which you speak to your neighbour can be just the comfort he needs in his difficulties. The way you get on and do your job without complaint, but with real conscientiousness shines out in an office that is full of people dedicated to furthering their own ends. The smile you give a colleague can lighten her day when she's feeling really down.

Now you may think that sounds like blessed thoughts for school assembly – Jesus can use your smile, indeed! But however twee that may sound, I believe it's true. If you, like those first disciples, are ready to put whatever you have at the disposal of the Master – however small and insignificant it may seem to you – he can bless it and bless others through it. The way you live your life, the things you say in everyday conversation in the place where God has put you – your frontline – people notice the little things, the consistent things, the things which to you are simply your way of getting on with life. Never feel that you have nothing to offer; never consider that what little you have can make no difference; never withhold from Jesus the little you have because you feel that it's not up to the task. Be encouraged that Jesus can use you and what you have to further his purposes in this world – and the next! He can bless your offering of yourself – all that you are and all that you have – and use it in the furthering of his Kingdom. Sometimes even the most complex of us need to hear a simple story and learn from it.

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This story is probably one of the best known of Jesus' miracles. It is the only miracle which is mentioned in all four gospels and it can be read on a number of different levels.

Jesus has tried to get a bit of peace and quiet by sailing away *"to a solitary place"*. But word spreads around that Jesus is around and the usual crowds begin to gather. Matthew tells us that Jesus *"had compassion on them"* and continued the task of preaching and healing. The Master was never too busy or too preoccupied to help those who needed him. This really is the human image of the God who never slumbers nor sleeps. We can always be sure that Jesus is there, ready to help us, even if no-one else is: an encouraging point, but not the main one.

*"As evening approached"* the disciples became concerned about the crowd and suggest to Jesus that he dismisses the crowds for a bit and lets them go off to find something to eat in the neighbouring villages. But Jesus makes them face up to the situation with seriousness. *"You give them something to eat,"* he says and tells the disciples to go round and tell the people to sit down ready to receive some of the small amount of food that they do have at their disposal. Jesus is not testing the disciples' faith. He is simply taking control. He knows what he is doing and the disciples have to believe that. They are struggling with the fact of their own inadequacy: what they have just is not equal to the task before them.

Once everyone is sitting down Jesus takes the bread and the fish – all that he has to work with, that which has been given but which seems totally unequal to the needs of the situation – and looks up to heaven, so that even those who could not hear his prayer could see that he was turning his eyes to his Father, to the God who was able to provide. Then he gave thanks and started breaking bits off the bread and fish. Jesus broke it up and passed it around via his disciples.

[There are interesting echoes here of other situations from the Old Testament. It looks back both to Moses and the experience of the people of Israel in the desert on their way out of Egypt, and to Elisha who miraculously provided food for a hundred prophets in *2 Kings 4:42-44*. In a sense, then, Jesus is continuing the work of *"the Law and the Prophets"*.]

The food is passed around and everyone has enough. In fact, there is so much that the disciples picked up twelve baskets full of leftovers. What the disciples had – the loaves and the fishes – seemed totally inadequate. In the end, they had to offer to Jesus what little they had and allow him to use it as he wished. As he blessed the offering of the food, so it was used to great effect and the needs of the crowd were more than met. And if you, like those first disciples, are ready to put whatever you have at the disposal of the Master – however small and insignificant it may seem to you – he can bless it and bless others through it.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. Why did Jesus feel such compassion for the crowds?
2. In Mark's Gospel it says that the people are *"like sheep without a shepherd"*? Would you say that's true of people today? Why/why not?
3. Who should be giving a lead to people today?
4. Do miracles such as this occur today? Why/why not?
5. What are the practical implications of this story for a) the Church, b) Wade Street Church, c) you?
6. What is the main thing you have learned from this story?