

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 45”

Matthew 15:29-39

There was a bit of a sense of déjà-vu as we read those words from Matthew’s Gospel this morning. Some of you are thinking, “Didn’t we read that a couple of weeks ago?” And many people are probably unaware that there is this story of the feeding of the 4,000, so used are we to talking about the feeding of the 5,000. Most people, when they realise that this is a different account wonder why Matthew has included another very similar story so soon after the first one – after all, it’s only in the previous chapter. Indeed, why include another version at all?

Maybe there was only one feeding and Matthew has included it twice by mistake. Mark’s Gospel has the two stories, so maybe Matthew just copied his version. Perhaps he just forgot it was already there – after all, these manuscripts were copied out by hand and if the copyist suddenly realised he’s already done this, he couldn’t be bothered to go back and change it all. Well, to suggest any of those reasons for finding such a similar story twice is really hardly worth taking seriously. Matthew clearly wasn’t stupid. If it was actually a mistake in copying it would have been rectified next time someone copied the manuscript. There were plenty of people still alive when this was first circulated who could have challenged Matthew’s version of events. And in the very next chapter, Jesus himself refers to two feedings (16:9,10). Certainly Jesus repeated many miracles in different places with different people – we don’t have records of them all: John tells us that in *John 20:30*.

And there are plenty of differences between the two stories, as well. The numbers are different, both of the number of people fed and of the food that was available. It was a different time of year – the feeding of the 5,000 took place while there was grass to sit on (14:19), whilst this one has the people sitting on the hard ground (15:35). And the places where they took place are different. In fact, that may be the key to this apparent repetition.

The feeding of the 4,000 almost certainly took place east of Galilee. In Mark’s version of the story, that’s made explicit and, although Matthew doesn’t name the place, there are plenty of clues here to a feeding which took place not amongst the Jews of the villages around Gennesaret and Capernaum, but amongst the Gentiles towards Decapolis. Clearly this story happens in a remote place (v33), not near any villages (14:15), so was to the east of the lake. Matthew uses different words for “basket” when it comes to collecting up the leftovers. In 14:20, the word used is *kophinos*, which was a small, distinctively shaped basket the Jews used to carry their food in. In 15:37 Matthew uses *spuris*, a kind of hamper used by the Gentiles. And Matthew tells us after the healings which kick off this episode, that the people “*praised the God of Israel*”, emphasising where they directed their praise in a way which he wouldn’t have needed to do if they were Jewish.

It would appear, then, that Matthew has included this second story of the feeding of a crowd to make a point about Jesus and his attitude towards the Gentiles. If we look back over this chapter 15, there seems to be a bit of a progression in the way Jesus is speaking and behaving. In *v11*, during his debate with the Pharisees, he makes a point which seems to cast doubt on Jewish food regulations. Then, in *v21*, he moves into Gentile territory, where he argues with a Gentile woman (as we saw last week). As a result of that, he heals a Gentile girl (*v28*) and then goes on to heal many people from the Gentile crowds who flock to him (*vv29-31*), before, in this story, actually feeding the Gentile crowds. Most of this is in the wake of the comments of the Gentile woman about eating “*the crumbs from the master’s table*”.

Matthew, as we have seen, has been establishing the credentials of Jesus for his first readers – Jewish believers still anxious whether they should be following this new Kingly Messiah or whether they are, in fact, betraying their Jewish heritage and the faith of their ancestors. For 14 chapters, Matthew has been showing just how Jewish Jesus is, setting out his descent from Abraham in the very first chapter and emphasising with quotations from and allusions to the Old Testament that this is truly the person who was predicted by the Hebrew prophets. Jesus is the one they’ve been waiting for – the Kingly Messiah who will usher in the Kingdom of God with all its promised peace and justice and righteousness.

But that Kingdom, as we began to see last time, is for all people. Yes, the Jews are the people through whom it will be proclaimed and into whose people the Messiah will be born, but this Kingdom will embrace all men and women – all of creation, in fact – and here are the first signs of that happening. The good news of the Kingdom is for the nations. And, as the image often used by the prophets to announce the Kingdom is a feast – for example in *Isaiah 25:6* and by Jesus himself in *Matthew 8:11* – what better way to demonstrate what Jesus is here for than to provide a feast.

[Interestingly, each phase of Jesus’ ministry ends with a feast: his ministry to the Jewish people with the feeding of the 5,000, his ministry in the Gentile areas before his journey to Jerusalem with the feeding of the 4,000, and his earthly ministry with the Last Supper.]

So Matthew has reported this second story of feeding crowds to show that Jesus’ ministry and the blessings of the Kingdom of God are not limited to the Jewish people. Jesus is a Kingly Messiah for all people – Jewish and Gentile. His Kingdom will eventually embrace all men and women. So, for his first Jewish readers he is saying that Jesus is indeed the one they’ve been waiting for, but, look, he has come for all people not just you.

And what is the driving force behind all this? What is it that motivates Jesus in doing this – that motivates God in his project to establish the Kingdom through his Son? Jesus makes that explicit in *v32* – “*I have compassion for these people*”. It’s compassion – deep, overwhelming compassion. The word Matthew uses here is one which is used in this way only of Jesus in the New Testament – and it’s not found in this form in any other ancient Greek literature. We can work out what it means because of the word at the root of it – the word *splachnon*, which means “*guts*”. The ancients believed that emotions resided in the stomach or in the guts – that’s where we often have physical feelings if we are deeply touched by something, and we still have vestiges of that kind of emotion in the words we use today. We talk about something being “gut-wrenching” or feeling “guttled”. Jesus was overcome here – as he was in the similar situation with the Jews in *14:14* – with real, deep, gut-wrenching pity for people who were struggling with the difficulties which life threw up for them, both short-term in their hunger and long-term in their diseases and disabilities.

In this story, Jesus is moved to pity by those who are sick, the ones he has had brought to him and he has healed. He is full of pity for those who are hungry, who have spent three days following him around and listening to his teaching. He can see the tiredness and the fatigue of those who are struggling to stick it out, those who are wearied with life and all that it has thrown at them. Basically, he has compassion on all those who are not experiencing life as it should be experienced, people who are missing out on the grace and peace and hope that are right at the heart of the coming Kingdom because they were right at the heart of God’s original plan for his world.

Jesus sees a situation that is not ideal and he wants to change it. So, for these people, he grants them a foretaste of the Kingdom, a glimpse of what is to come. He brings healing and wholeness to those whose lives are blighted by illness and infirmity (*v31*). He brings satisfaction to those who are hungry and needy (*v37*). He brings rest and relief to those who are tired and weary. That’s the way of the Kingdom – healing, feasting, reviving.

Read through the Gospels and you will see just how often Jesus is moved by the plight of others – and how he responds with compassion, with love, with renewal. This is a reflection of the deep, deep compassion of God that has been shown to his people down through the centuries – just look at the things he says through the prophet Hosea or the promises he makes through Isaiah.

As Jesus demonstrates his gut-wrenching compassion for people who have lost their way and are losing out on the blessings of God, so that leads to transformation. The lives of the people Jesus meets in this story are transformed – some in the long term as they regain the ability to walk, to see, to hear, to speak;

some in the shorter term as they are fed and rested. But all of them experience the transformation that is at the very heart of the Kingdom message.

That transformation leads, in turn, to satisfaction. Matthew makes that clear in v37. Again, that has been the hallmark of God's dealing with humanity. Through Jesus, God brings fullness of life and a sense of fulfilment to all who believe in him, who trust him to help them, who accept his offer of grace. And that then releases praise and worship to God. The people whose lives had been transformed as Jesus brought them healing, who were able to receive the nourishment and release that he offered them, they were the ones who "*praised the God of Israel*" (v31). Nothing else, no-one else can bring the kind of satisfaction and fulfilment that Jesus can, so the natural response is to direct praise and worship towards the God who sent him.

The compassion of Jesus is not just for the Jewish people – it's for all people, for you and for me. As we recognise what Jesus has done and what he can offer, then we can receive his love, we can be touched by his compassion and the transformation of our lives can begin. Through what Jesus taught and did, through his words and his example, through his death and resurrection, through his intercession and his Spirit's power, we can begin to experience something of what life in the Kingdom will be like. And as we do that, our response will be one of worship and praise, lifting our voices in prayer and thanksgiving and living our lives in joyful response to a God who cares about us, who has compassion on us and who wants us to live with him forever.

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This is another version of the story of the miraculous feeding a crowd. But why include another version? Has Matthew included it twice by mistake? Maybe Matthew just copied Mark's version. Perhaps he just forgot it was already there. But Matthew clearly wasn't stupid. If it was actually a mistake in copying it would have been rectified next time someone copied the manuscript. There were plenty of people still alive when this was first circulated who could have challenged Matthew's version of events. And in the very next chapter, Jesus himself refers to two feedings (16:9,10). Jesus repeated many miracles in different places with different people (and see *John 20:30*). The numbers are different, both of the number of people fed and of the food that was available. It was a different time of year – the feeding of the 5,000 took place while there was grass to sit on (14:19), whilst this one has the people sitting on the hard ground (15:35). And the places where they took place are different.

The feeding of the 4,000 almost certainly took place east of Galilee. This story happens in a remote place (v33), not near any villages (14:15), so was to the east of the lake. Matthew uses different words for "basket" when it comes to collecting up the leftovers (in 14:20, the Jewish word *kophinos*; in 15:37 the Gentile word *spuris*). After the healings the people "praised the God of Israel", emphasising where they directed their praise in a way Matthew wouldn't have needed to do if they were Jewish.

This is about Jesus' attitude towards the Gentiles. In chapter 15, there is a progression in the way Jesus is speaking and behaving. In v11, he seems to cast doubt on Jewish food regulations. In v21, he moves into Gentile territory, where he argues with a Gentile woman and heals a Gentile girl (v28). He heals many people from the Gentile crowds who flock to him (vv29-31), then feeds the Gentile crowds. All this is after the comment about eating "the crumbs from the master's table".

Matthew has been establishing the credentials of Jesus for his first readers in the first 14 chapters – the Kingly Messiah who will usher in the Kingdom of God with all its promised peace and justice and righteousness, a Kingdom for all people. The image often used by the prophets to announce the Kingdom is a feast (look at *Isaiah 25:6* and *Matthew 8:11*).

The driving force behind all this is when Jesus says "I have compassion for these people". Jesus was overcome here (and in 14:14) with real, deep, gut-wrenching pity for people who were struggling with the difficulties which life threw up for them, both short-term in their hunger and long-term in their diseases and disabilities. The compassion leads to transformation. And the transformation brings satisfaction (v37) and worship (v31).

Through what Jesus taught and did, through his words and his example, through his death and resurrection, through his intercession and his Spirit's power, we can begin to experience something of what life in the Kingdom will be like. And our response will be one of worship and praise.

Questions for discussion

1. Did you know there were two stories of the miraculous feedings of crowds in Matthew's Gospel? Why did you think that was?
2. What do you think of when you hear of Jesus' compassion? Have you experienced his compassion in your life? How?
3. In what ways have you seen or experienced the transformation that Jesus brings?
4. What moves you to praise God?
5. What have you learned from this story? What are you going to do about it?