

Bread and Water - Mark 6.30-56

Series: Following Jesus: Studies in Mark's Gospel

Date: 13 February 2022; 6th Sunday after Epiphany

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Isaiah 55.1-3; Colossians 1.15-20; Mark 6:30-44

One of my favourite books of the Bible is Ecclesiastes. The writer sets out to reflect on his life, and he does so by seeking to experience as much as possible. In chapter 2 he writes

4 I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. ... 8 I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man.

10 I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;
I refused my heart no pleasure.
My heart took delight in all my work,
and this was the reward for all my labor.

But, he concludes,

11 .. when I surveyed all that my hands had done
and what I had toiled to achieve,
everything was [mist], a chasing after the wind;
nothing was gained under the sun.

And so he despairs.

17 So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

The author of Ecclesiastes lived 2,500 years ago, but he could have been describing life today. We live in the wealthiest, most prosperous society that has ever existed. And yet it feels like every other person I talk to is battling some kind of mental illness or burn out, and especially young people. We have so much and yet people are anxious, depressed and despairing. Many look to fill a hole in self-destructive ways. All this suggests that there is a spiritual emptiness amidst our prosperity.

Speaking on BBC radio in 1942, C.S. Lewis said:

Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger; well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim; well there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desires: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this

*world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.*¹

The caverns of the soul are infinitely deep. And maybe that's an emptiness you've felt. Maybe on paper you should be satisfied - a lovely spouse, kids, a good job, great house, good friends, and living in the paradise of Tasmania. But there's a hunger that you just can't seem to satisfy, and you're looking for what will. Maybe you're not a Christian but you've seen that there's something that the Christians you know seem to have and you wonder what it might be.

We're continuing our series in Mark, looking at three themes: Who is Jesus? What is the Kingdom of God? And what does it mean to follow Jesus? This morning in Mark 6 we're looking at 2 of Jesus' most famous miracles: Feeding the 5000 and walking on water. These miracles teach us that God provides for our physical and spiritual needs through Jesus. He gives us our daily bread. And that is because Jesus is none other than God, come in the flesh. Although, as we'll see, the disciples, and us too may find this hard to understand. So we'll explore those 3 themes in our 2 stories, Bread and Water.

1. Bread (30-44)

Have a look with me, Mark 6.30-44.

The story opens with the disciples returning from their preaching tour mentioned in verse 6-15. They're tired, and there are so many people pressing to see Jesus that he suggests some time out for a team breather. But what starts out as some R&R turns into a giant party, with Jesus as the consummate host. The people keep following Jesus, and in verse 34 we read

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

It's the end of the day and Jesus doesn't want to send the crowd home with full heads and empty bellies. But there's a problem, dinner for 5000 blokes (not to mention their families), wasn't part of the conference planning. Only one person seems to have brought a packed lunch - 5 bread rolls and 2 fish.

But Jesus takes the meager supplies, Gives thanks to God, Breaks the bread and the fish into pieces and says, "Hand out the meal." And lo and behold, the

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (Fount: Glasgow, 1997) 113

multitude is fed! And what's more, like any good host, there's more than enough for all the guests.

It's one of Jesus' most famous miracles, but it raises some questions. Some people reject outright Jesus doing this sort of thing because it's a violation of the laws of nature. 5 loaves and 2 fish simply cannot become food for thousands of people. To get around this, some people say that the real miracle was that people's hearts were opened to share the food they had stashed away, like the boy John's gospel records was the one who brought the bread and fish. But that is to misread the text and to sell it short.

No, this miracle is a window into who Jesus is. Mark is clear from his first sentence. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus isn't just a great teacher, he's the Son of God, God come in the flesh. Yes, it's a miracle alright, contrary to the laws of nature. But it's not a *violation of nature*. It can't be when it's the one who created and who sustains nature who is bringing this about. Did you pick up what our 2nd reading from Colossians said about Christ? *All things were created through him and for him. He is before all things and **in him all things hold together**.*

You see God doesn't just create the universe and then leave it to its own devices. He continues to uphold and sustain it. And he does this through his Son. *In him all things hold together*. And he *provides* for all that he has made, including us. This is what theologians call the doctrine of *Providence*. This miracle is a window in how God works - not by working against nature, but rather by working through the stuff of creation. There is a continuity between his ordinary work of Providence and his extraordinary work in the miraculous.

This miracle on the shores of Galilee 2000 years ago is a picture of how God provides for each one of us. He causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the wicked as well the righteous. You can look to him to provide for your needs. This is why Jesus tells us to ask God to give you your daily bread. On that day the bread answered the call of its Maker to feed those in need. He will provide for you today.

But this story also points to a deeper hunger that Jesus satisfies. He feeds not only the body but also the soul.

We get a sense of this in Jesus' response to the crowd in verse 34

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, *he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*

The people need a shepherd like the one in Psalm 23, who makes them lie down in green pastures, who leads them by still waters, who refreshes the soul. One who will guide them on paths of righteousness. One who will walk with them in the valley of the shadow of death, whose rod and staff will comfort. And Jesus is that shepherd, the good shepherd, who lays down his life for the sheep.

And how does he respond to this deeper spiritual hunger?

He began teaching them many things.

We're reminded of the words Jesus said when tempted in the desert, *Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.*²

We need God's word to live.

It's the same message as Isaiah 55.

- 1 "Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters;
and you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without cost.
- 2 Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labor on what does not satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.
- 3 ***Give ear and come to me;***
hear me, that your soul may live.

Then, in verse 41, we get another hint at how Jesus satisfies that deeper hunger.

Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to set before the people.

The early church saw this as pointing towards another moment when Jesus would take the bread, give thanks, break it and give it to his disciples. In the Last Supper Jesus told his followers the meaning of his death. He would sacrifice his life that they might live. His body would be broken and his blood

² Matthew 4.4

would be shed so that they might be forgiven and restored to communion with God. Just as God had provided manna in the wilderness, the bread of heaven, to feed his people Israel, so in this miracle Jesus pointed to how he would offer us his body, the true bread of heaven. As God himself, he is the source of life. His body is real food, his blood real drink. Just as we need our daily bread so also we need to feed on Christ to live.

Saint Augustine opens his spiritual autobiography with the same theme. Speaking to God he says

You have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.

We're made for God. Only he can fill the infinite cavern in our hearts. Apart from him we wither and die. But He is the one who can nourish our souls.

Later in the service we'll come to share in the Lord's Supper. If you're a Christian, this is a moment for your hearts to be nourished and your soul fed by Christ. I love Augustine's picture of the Lord's Supper. As you press your teeth into the bread you spiritually press your teeth into Christ.³ So come and receive the bread and wine, and know that Jesus' body was broken for *you* and his blood shed for *your sins*. And so be strengthened to follow him. If you're not yet a believer, this is what is going on. Jesus offers his life for you, but you only receive him by faith. So if you're not trusting Christ, don't take the bread and wine, just receive a blessing. If you're not sure, maybe today for the first time you could receive Christ. He offers himself for you. Come with hands open to ready to receive his grace to you. As you eat and drink, thank Christ in your heart for death for you and the life he gives.

Christ feeds both the body and the soul. What does this text teach us about following Jesus? Sometimes people object to this miracle and say, well if Jesus could feed 5000, why doesn't he end hunger today? This misunderstands the primary purpose of Jesus' miracles, which is to show who he is. But second, it misses Jesus' words to his disciples. *You give them something to eat*. We are called to follow his example of compassion, and to feed the hungry. But even

³ Cf. John 6.32-58; Augustine, *Tractate 26*; Calvin, *Short Treatise on the Supper of our Lord*; 39 Articles, Articles XXV, XXVI, XXVIII, XXIX.

Article XXVIII: The Supper of the Lord is not only a sign of the love that Christians ought to have among themselves one to another; but rather it is a Sacrament of our Redemption by Christ's death: insomuch that to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith, receive the same, the Bread which we break is a partaking of the Body of Christ; and likewise the Cup of Blessing is a partaking of the Blood of Christ.

... The Body of Christ is given, taken, and eaten, in the Supper, only after an heavenly and spiritual manner. And the mean whereby the Body of Christ is received and eaten in the Supper is Faith.

as we understand this we see the disciples coming to an end of their emotional and material resources. They are tired and hungry and have nothing to give. The reality is, like the disciples, we don't have the resources in ourselves to meet the needs of others. But when we trust Christ; when we look to him to supply our needs and *through us* to supply the needs of others, then we can give.

So much for God providing our daily bread through Jesus. What about the second miracle? That brings us to, a much briefer, point 2.

2. Water (45-56)

Read with me verse 45.

45 Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. **46** After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.

Before we look at the miracle, it's worth noting verse 46. Jesus seeks a moment of solitude to spend in communion with his Father. That's what prayer is. It's in prayer that Jesus finds his own nourishment. And it's true for us too. Prayer is so easily crowded out by other important things. If we want to be able to do all that God calls us to, we need to seek solitude with our Father, and be nourished in prayer. I know this is a lesson I have to keep relearning.

Back to the story. This is the second moment in Mark's gospel the disciples find themselves struggling on the Sea of Galilee. Back in chapter 4 Jesus calmed the storm with a word. On that occasion he asked them, "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" They were terrified and said, "Who is this? Even the wind and waves obey him!"⁴ Now as they're straining against the wind, they see Jesus walking past them as though the lake was solid ground. Understandably, they cry out in terror. What is going on? What are they seeing? A ghost?

Immediately he spoke to them and said, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." **51** Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, **52** for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.

I find this moment so helpful. We as readers know Mark's introduction - that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. But the disciples don't know that. What

⁴ Mark 4.35-41

Jesus is doing is outside their experience and understanding. It takes time to come to grips with just what these things mean about who Jesus is. And that's true for us too. Our journey as disciples, learners in the way of Jesus, for that's what disciple means, is one where we too may not understand, certainly not at first. There is space to work things out. Bible study is a great place to do that. But over time things become clearer.

Second, we see that recognising who Jesus is is not just an intellectual exercise. There is a spiritual dimension to our understanding. "Their hearts were hardened." We need our hearts changed to really grasp who Jesus is and what he has done. More on that next week in chapter 7.

But, even if we don't understand, that doesn't change the reality of who Jesus is. "Take courage! It is I. Do not be afraid." With years of reflection on Jesus' words and deeds, the apostle Paul could write that extraordinary statement that,

All things have been created through him and for him ... and in him all things hold together.⁵

If Jesus really is the eternal Son of the Father, come in the flesh, then it should not surprise us that, as one theologian put it, "he can find a place for the sole of his foot in everything that he has made."⁶ But even if we don't understand, we need not be afraid because he is with us. He has crossed the sea and stepped into the boat with us. In all his power and authority, he is with us and he is for us. He not only satisfies our deepest hunger, he also calms our deepest fear. With him, we need not be afraid. Will you come to him? Will you trust him?

⁵ Colossians 1.16-17

⁶ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Word in Small Boats*, Eerdmans, 2010: 133