

Based on Matthew 14: 13-21

It occurred to me some time ago (can't think why?) that there are a variety of methods to conduct an investigation into something. A variety of questions to ask and a variety of ways to interpret the answers. Following exactly the same method to examine chronologically disparate circumstances and information; all of which will be inevitably varied and usually unique, can be a great mistake and may lead to comparatively unproductive results.

In scriptural terms, familiar passages often yield fresh meanings, if we are open to following more than one line of approach and this is certainly the case in Matthew's account of the 'feeding of the five thousand'. I can't believe that I am either the first or the only person to have ever questioned who actually counted the persons present to ascertain that there were indeed five thousand. Teachers, Youth organisation leaders, coach party couriers and even police officers marshalling crowds at a public event, will know how difficult it is to accurately count who is there (certainly in the latter example!) even when everyone is almost stationary! So I think it must be safe to assume that the figure mentioned in this story is just to emphasise the presence of a very large number of people?

Now let's consider the context of the story. It occurs in the narrative immediately following the account of the beheading of John the Baptist (Matt 14:1-12) which is an incident that acts as a 'flashback' to an earlier time in order to explain why Herod (actually it's Herod Antipas - son of King Herod) is a bit anxious about Jesus. He thinks that Jesus may in fact be John risen from the dead and so his anxiety leads Jesus to attempt to withdraw to a "deserted place".

Next the context shows us two contrasting meals. There is Herod's birthday party and Jesus feeding the crowds. In the birthday party which is in an environment which is used to having plenty of everything, we see the gruesome details of the scheming of Herodias. The story turns into resentment and revenge and even gets to the point where Herod himself realises the horrific trap in which he has been caught. So a prophet of God is murdered by someone in authority who feels threatened. In the second story, in a contrasting environment of extreme need, Jesus' compassion for others leads to the cure of the sick and the provision of a meal for many people. Even though Jesus is potentially under threat himself and unable to successfully

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withdraw from the situation, he nevertheless becomes host for many hungry people.

The compassion of the second situation stands out in sharp contrast against the nasty and vindictive nature of the first one.

Jesus' compassion for the crowds could be said to have 'rubbed off' onto the disciples. They get concerned about how late it is and the lack of available food for the crowds. They suggest that Jesus sends them to surrounding villages to buy supplies but Jesus has other plans. He says: "They need not go away; YOU give them something to eat" and "Bring them here to me".

In the account of this story in John's Gospel (6:9), there is a young boy present at this stage. The omission of the boy from the Matthew account gives us the chance for a more concentrated focus on the relationship between Jesus and the disciples.

The disciples aren't able to scrape much together in the form of resources but Jesus makes them realise that what they are able to give - however limited the resources might seem - are sufficient for what is needed. In fact, in Jesus' hands they are more than enough!

We see a description of the miraculous power of Jesus when confronted with a difficult situation but we are also shown that the role of disciples (which includes people like us!) is integral to the exercise of that power. They (and we) are indispensable from the diagnosis of what is needed right through to the gathering up of the leftovers. Jesus gives them instructions that seem ridiculous and unachievable in the circumstances - but they just trust him and get on with it. They are perfect illustrations in this story of what it really means to participate in the compassionate ministry of Jesus. Also, because they were ready to trust in Jesus and do as they were told, the disciples learned a fair bit about God's concern for the hungry and needy.

They didn't get a briefing beforehand - they just TRUSTED AND HAD FAITH - and saw that God's compassion and grace exceeded their wildest dreams.

I think many people will already realise the Eucharistic symbolism in this story too. Interestingly, it is only the bread and not the fish that are specifically given to the disciples to hand out (14:19). The marshalling/organising of the crowd, prayer, blessing, breaking of the bread and the parallel to the death of John the Baptist are all fairly clear links to the Holy Communion/Lord's

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Supper. It's quite easy to spot connections between the feeding of the crowd at Galilee and the meal in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. In both cases Jesus is the provider demonstrating compassion for those with him. We are reminded that this is about spiritual sustenance as well as physical feeding. Also, both meals hosted by Jesus are in an environment of opposition and potential danger. It's like Psalm 23 verse 5 says: "You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies". The Eucharistic meal takes on a special relevance for people whose faithfulness has put them in dangerous circumstances.

The message for us - I suggest - as it was for those first disciples, is that we are 'under instruction' from God through Jesus Christ to 'feed the hungry' in every sense of that phrase and its incorporated words.

The message, I believe, is that it's not just about someone in a role such as mine, distributing Holy Communion elements. It's about ALL of us disciples, distributing God's love, compassion and sustenance in whatever way each of us is individually qualified and able to do so.

Just like those first disciples, we are an integral part of God's purpose and we need to trust and obey (to quote the hymn!), without needing a pre-task briefing.

Amen