

John 6:1-21

The Feeding of the Five Thousand

Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), ² and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick. ³ Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. ⁴ The Jewish Passover Festival was near. ⁵ When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" ⁶ He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

⁷ Philip answered him, "It would take more than half a year's wages^(a) to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"

⁸ Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, ⁹ "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"

¹⁰ Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

¹² When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." ¹³ So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

¹⁴ After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." ¹⁵ Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

Jesus Walks on the Water

¹⁶ When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, ¹⁷ where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them. ¹⁸ A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough. ¹⁹ When they had rowed about three or four miles,^(b) they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were frightened. ²⁰ But he said to them, "It is I; don't be afraid." ²¹ Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.

Rees Howells was a missionary who found himself involved in the Welsh revival in the early 1900s. His life story is full of the remarkable, as God used him to inspire, shape and change things. One of the big stories of his life was that he founded the Bible College of Wales. God told him to do this. He found himself led to a large manor house just outside Swansea, that was for sale. Rees promised to buy the house, though he did so not having two shillings to rub together.

When the agreement had been signed, Howells had ten days in which to pay the deposit. On the day he was due to go to the solicitor with the money, he was £140 short. He was still short this sum when the actual hour arrived, so in faith he set off to the office without it. He hadn't been there long when his wife arrived. She had followed him down with the post, and in it were three checks, which made up the £140 to the penny!

The rest of the money came in similarly crazy ways — he prayed relentlessly about the finances and then, for example, he would be at the station and someone would walk up to him and hand him an envelope with money in. He didn't even put out fundraising requests — he was determined to follow the example of his hero, George Muller, who had founded an orphanage near Bristol without ever specifically requesting money. And so it happened — I'm not sure if he put God to the test, or if God put him to the test — much like the story of Brother Andrew which I shared a few weeks ago, everything was accounted for, everything paid for, through God's humorous way of getting things done.

The feeding of the five thousand was not just a miracle. It was a miracle with a message about the overwhelming abundance of God's love for his people. When God fed Moses and the Israelites on manna during the exodus from Egypt, the manna only lasted for a day. There was provision for their needs, but just enough. When Jesus fed the five thousand there was so much that not only did they all stuff themselves, but there were vastly more leftovers at the end than there had been food when they started! Jesus took a boy's poor peasant food and transformed it into enough to feed a town!

Now, you may say, so what? You may say: 'that was then, this is now!' And it is true that Jesus does not physically walk either the Golan heights (where this feast likely took place) or the streets of Theberton or Middleton. But we know he is with us, and Jesus's character is constant. The abundance of the feeding of the five thousand is a promise of abundance. The abundance of wine at the wedding at Cana is a promise of abundance. The manna in the desert three and half thousand years ago was also a promise. There's even a story in 2 Kings about a hundred soldiers being fed on only a few barley buns. All of these are promises.

They speak of Jesus's growing, multiplying love and goodness. That his grace is growing and his love reaching further and further. That he feeds increasing numbers of us.

We might take this promise as a spiritual picture. When we pray 'give us this day our daily bread' we might just be thinking of spiritual sustenance. But honestly, I think it's both. I've heard many more stories of the hungry being fed unexpectedly, when they were at rock bottom, when they had thrown themselves on God.

Here's a different story — 'the Grace Outpouring' describes the incredible blessings that happened through a small retreat centre in Wales called Ffald-y-brenin. Praying for blessing on the local community was at the heart of the daily rhythm established there. Things happened as a result. Local farmers found their flocks of sheep producing more sets of twins and triplets than ever before. One farmer was amazed when his herd of cows produced prize-winning, once-in-a-lifetime calves one year after the next. God was blessing the Gwaun Valley because of his people's specific prayers for blessing.

Sometimes when God demonstrates his abundance it is out of a sense that the abundance is in the system somewhere, and God prompts you and me to use it for *that* cause. At other times, God simply blesses those who seek it, who intercede for it, who yearn for it. Sometimes God simply blesses, because it is God's nature to bless, just as it is in your nature to be generous.

You may ask 'Isn't this prosperity gospel? Isn't there something wrong with this?' Well — in case you don't know what I'm talking about, prosperity gospel is a trend in some churches that says that God *will* bless you, and bless you with material riches. It says be generous, and then God will be more generous to you. It says, if you are poor your faith wasn't good enough. And that set of thoughts right there is wrong. Because some saints die in poverty (but knowing the richness of a life lived in God), and because when God blesses he is more likely to lift up the poor than extend the wealth of the rich. When Jesus fed five thousand, he made food for the hungry, not wealth for the hedge-fund manager.

Why don't we see more of this? I think people in the developing world see more of God's abundance than we will. We tend to trust in our bank accounts, and then when they fail, we trust in God. What we're talking about is people who have nothing except trust in God to fall back on. And when we trust in God alone, God becomes abundant to us.

The people who followed Jesus around the lake brought nothing except a longing to know God's word, and they were fed. Rees Howells had no money, but faith, but by prayer alone enough money came to him to found the Bible college of Wales. The people at Ffald-y-brenin sought nothing for themselves but sought God's blessing on the poor farming community

around them, and they saw glimpses of God's abundance breaking through all across the countryside.

Let us all yearn for God's abundance with a little more trust and expectation, and watch as God blesses those around us.

Amen.

SDG.

Sources:

Rees Howells, *Intercessor* by Norman Grubb (1952, Lutterworth Press)

The Grace Outpouring by Roy Godwin and Dave Roberts (2008, David C Cook Publishing)

A big thank you to all those who took part and supported the Wildflower Festival, it was a great success and people were incredibly moved by the displays and the churchyard