

## Food for the journey (Mark 6.30-44)

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When you think about it, we do a lot of eating in our lives. In the wealthy West, most of us dine three times a day. By the time we're 70 we've consumed approximately 76,650 meals. Most are quickly forgotten (Can you remember what you ate last Thursday??). But some we do recall, even years later. One for me, is a lunch Sarah and I shared in a little café in Bordeaux in 2013. We'd just jumped off the train from Spain after walking our first *camino* and found a tiny two-star hotel in the middle of town. Next door, stood a crepe café filled with French families out for lunch. Inside the atmosphere was lively, with tables set among stone arches. We found one at the back, and sat down. We ordered an Emmental and goats cheese galette, with a garden salad and glass of house rosé, and I tell you, it was superb!! So simple; so good. It was eight years ago, but I remember it as if it were yesterday.

I could talk about others but I'd only make you hungry. Besides, you're probably recalling a few of your own!! Maybe your wedding breakfast, or a family dinner from childhood – Christmas or a birthday. Or maybe a meal you shared in some exotic place, or the last meal you ate with a loved one? It may just be a simple meal you shared at home, and yet something about it stays with you.

If we were to ask the disciples to talk about memorable meals, I imagine the one we've just read about would get a mention. It's pretty amazing, isn't it. The situation wasn't promising – a huge crowd and little to work with. But in the end, it says, 'they all ate and were filled'. It would've been hard to forget that day, and the story appears in all four gospels.

Just as our meal in Bordeaux happened against the backdrop of our *camino*, so this meal is given significance in part by what precedes it. The 'apostles' have just returned from their first mission trip and gathered with Jesus to debrief. It'd been all action, both encouraging and demanding, and Jesus now calls them away to a deserted place. In Mark's gospel, the stress on balancing ministry activity with time apart is notable. Jesus practiced this rhythm himself and he invites his disciples to

do the same. The need was great, as it is today; their work necessary. But they weren't to imagine they could endlessly keep at it without times of rest and recreation.

This was one of those times, and Jesus packs them all into a boat headed for a solitary place... Alas, *'many saw them going,'* and *'hurried there on foot ... ahead of them'*. Now, we could imagine Jesus being a bit miffed at this intrusion (Come on folks, give us a break!!) but instead, it says, he had 'compassion' and *'began to teach them many things'*.

As the evening drew on, the disciples observe: Lord it's late and this is a deserted place, send them away to the surrounding villages to buy something to eat. Jesus' response both shocks and frustrates them: *'You give them something to eat'. What? Get real. It'd cost a fortune to feed this lot, it's money we don't have... It's not funny...*

*What have you got, Jesus asks, in response? How many loaves?' Go and see?'* They return with a paltry report. Five loaves, that's it – five loaves and two fish.

Jesus seems undaunted. Make them sit down, he says. Which they do – 'in groups of hundreds and fifties' (I'll come back to that). And then, taking the humble offering, he looked to heaven, 'blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all' (dried and salted we assume). *'And all ate and were filled'*, it says, *'and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.'* And so, what begins with almost nothing, seeming scarcity, ends in abundance. Definitely a meal to remember!! But what are we to make of it?

First, a word about the overarching message. Biblical commentators note strong messianic overtones in this event and the way it's narrated. Philip Long notes, for example, that the miracle seems enacts the expectation set out in Isaiah 40-55, that the people of Israel would re-gather in the wilderness and re-experience wilderness events, including divine provision of manna. With his three-time mention

of ‘deserted place’, Mark seems to be stressing this wilderness connection. And Long notes other connections, such as the description of the crowd as being *like sheep without a shepherd*. In the book of Numbers (27:15-23), prior to his death in the wilderness, Moses asks the Lord to appoint a leader over the people so that they will *‘not be like sheep without a shepherd’*. Also, the note about them sitting in groups of hundreds and fifties resonates with Exodus 18 (21, 25), where Moses divided the people into groups of ‘thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens’. And finally, there’s the comment that ‘all ate and were filled’. It was long expected in Israel that the Messiah, when he came, would usher in an age of abundance, and the hungry would be filled. Which is what’s happening here; *all* are fed and there are plentiful leftovers, 12 baskets no less – the perfect number, perfectly filled!! In performing this miracle, Jesus isn’t simply meeting the physical need of the crowd, he is enacting a long-awaited Messianic promise – spreading a table in the wilderness.

And within this overarching symbolism, we can discern something profound about the way God works and invites us to participate. There are two things in particular that I’d like to draw out.

1. The need to balance action with contemplation; our work in the world with times of re-creation.

This story begins with Jesus urging the ‘apostles’ (those sent on mission) to withdraw and rest. In the first story of creation, this principle is built into the rhythm of the week – God works and God rests. It’s also enshrined in the Ten Commandments. ‘*Six days you shall labour and do all your work*’, it says in Exodus 20, ‘*but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God*’. There’s no question that action is important. Our activity matters, and so too does pausing from activity. We’ve touched on this before, and it keeps coming up.

In the western world and church, we err on the side of activity. ‘Our calendars are filled with appointments, our days and weeks are filled with engagements, and our years are filled with plans and projects,’ Rueben Job writes,

(1994.47). ‘There is seldom a period in which we don’t know what to do, and we move through life in such a distracted way that we don’t even take the time and rest to wonder if any of the things we think, say or do are worth thinking, saying, or doing. We simply go along with the many ‘musts’ and ‘oughts’ that have been handed on to us... as if they were authentic translations of the Gospel of our Lord’.

These words were written almost thirty years ago – before mobile phones and social media colonised even more of our attention. They speak to why it’s vital to balance action with contemplation, as the disciples were urged. It allows time for rest, *and* for realignment – for discerning if what we’re doing is what we’re meant to be doing, called to be doing, best to be doing? ‘Solitude and rest are not “icing” or “extras”, Bonnie Thurston writes, as she reflects on this gospel text (2002.79), ‘they are the very environment from which fruitful ministry grows’.

2. When it comes to meeting the needs of the world God works with who and what is made available.

In the story, the disciples see the hungry crowd (the need) and are defeated by the shortfall of resources. *It’ll take more, much more, than we’ve got to feed this lot*, they assume. But Jesus sees it differently. *What have you got*; he asks? ‘*Go and see.*’ ‘*Five loaves and a couple fish*’, they reply, but that’s nothing really. *No, not nothing*, Jesus implies, *it’s something; let’s work with that...* He takes the bread, dedicates and divides it, and hands it back to *them* to set before the people. There’s something beautiful here about the way they remain involved – it’s a shared ministry. Jesus doesn’t just take over, do it for us; he does it with us. It’s the same with the fish, it too is dedicated and distributed. ‘*And*’, the passage says, matter-of-factly, ‘*all ate and were filled, and they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces*’.

When it comes to meeting the needs of the world, God works with what we offer. We tend to think in terms of deficits – what we don’t have, can’t afford, couldn’t do. It’s scarcity thinking and it is constantly limiting; it causes us to be hesitant and miserly, to play it safe (bury the talent rather than invest it); not to start something important because we can’t see how we’d ever get there. With God

it's the opposite. It's not what we *don't* have that counts, it's what we make available. God works creatively with what we offer – as meagre as it may seem. And as this happens, over time (sometimes a long time), it proves to be *more than enough!!* The tiny seed becomes a shrub with birds nesting in the branches; a pinch of yeast leavens the dough; two talents become four, and five become ten.

When it comes to meeting the needs of the world (and the church), God works with what's on offer. Which invites us simply to offer what we have and are, and trust the fulfilment to God.

I'd like to finish with some words written by Katherine Hawker – a confession of sorts, but also a prayer of consecration. If they resonate, I invite you to add your amen at the end.

Dear Lord,

'We come believing in our emptiness,  
believing that we will never have enough,  
believing that what we have is unworthy.

We come fearful of sharing,  
fearful of losing our tenuous grip on security,  
fearful of touching and knowing the pain of others.

We come overwhelmed by the hunger,  
overwhelmed by the suffering of children near and far,  
overwhelmed by the endless tales of senseless violence, greed, and death.

We come aching from the weight of the responsibility,  
aching from the chilling challenge of knowing our abundance,  
aching from the gnawing awareness that we have much to share.

We come clinging to our meagre lunches;  
bless them, and us.  
break them, and us.  
share them, and us.' **Amen.**