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Sermon

God's Abundant Provision

John 6:1-15; 2 Kings 4:42-44

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The John tells us in chapter 6, verse 4: "The Jewish Passover Festival was near." The Jewish feasts figure as a structure in John's gospel and he relates passages to the feast and the significance of the feast.

The Passover commemorates the deliverance of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and protection of the first born. It directly connects to the Exodus, the escape from Egypt to the Wilderness through the Red Sea. Moses was the great leader who led the people to freedom. In the wilderness there was no food yet God fed for 40 years with manna which appeared on the ground with the dew – bread from heaven.

Last week in Mark 6, we heard that the disciples had been on their preaching tour of the villages and had come back to Jesus to report that God used them to heal and bring spiritual deliverance. Jesus took them aside to a quiet place but the crowd followed them and he started to teach them.

Now we pick up the story in John's gospel. The accounts are very similar indeed. Essentially, a great crowd of people followed him to a remote place. At the end of the day, Jesus considers the hunger of the people. The idea of regular meals being essential for life and comfort is very much a modern wealthy notion. John Bei told us that In Tanzania, most people eat twice a day – midday and evening. On our visits we see them going most of the day without food or drink without complaint. In the last village we visited, we taught a session and then led them in praying for each other. I then suggested they should have a break for food or a drink but the leaders insisted that they would rather carry on with a second session of teaching. Practically, I think they would have lost the people for too long if they had gone away to get refreshments but my point is they were content to be in church for the day seminar with initial introductions, choir performances, two teaching sessions with prayer ministry, followed by the farewells and presentations - a total of six hours without food or drink.

This crowd had been out most of the day presumably and Jesus wonders aloud where to buy food for them all. John makes it obvious he was using it as a teaching moment for the disciples.

Philip bypasses the question of where they are going to find a market with food enough for such a large number of people to boggle at the cost of it – eight months' pay or literally 200 denarii. Wow just a bite each would cost 200 days' pay!

Andrew, perhaps inspired, maybe desperate, suggests the only food they have is the lunch of a young boy: five barley loaves and two fish. Barley loaves were the food of the poor – these would be like small pita breads

and the particular word for fish indicates something like a sardine or an anchovy. Not very much to go on with for a man.

Jesus tells the disciples to get the people to sit down. Mark adds the detail in his account that they grouped them in fifties and hundreds – hence it was easy to count the size of the whole crowd.

Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it out, then the same with the fish. Somehow there was a multiplication – both John and Mark (and indeed Matthew and Luke) record that “... they all had enough to eat...”. That is wonderful! Don’t let it be diminished for you by familiarity. I know our minds boggle at such things. But don’t let unbelief spoil your joy – it is a choice to believe or disbelieve and sometimes when good evidence has been presented, disbelief comes down to stubbornness or pride.)

Last week I showed you the video of Samuel who had been blind and yet after Helen, John and I prayed for him, he could see! I am not claiming he had perfect sight but beforehand he and two others said he had never seen and afterwards he could count fingers on my hand, recognise and point to objects according to their colour and track moving objects. That is a big improvement over not seeing. Some of you believed and rejoiced. Probably some dismissed it as impossible or tried to find another explanation for it. Each time we hear such an account there is the challenge: Do you believe or disbelieve?

Old Testament Parallels

The feeding of the five thousand has some major resonances with Old Testament events. Our Old Testament reading is one such parallel when Elisha fed the men from a small amount of food. In Elisha’s case he was given 20 loaves to feed 100 men, whereas Jesus fed 5000 from 5 loaves. One greater than Elisha is here.

Elisha’s servant wondered, “How can I set this before a hundred men?” Andrew offered the boy’s lunch as he doubtfully said, “... but how far will they go among so many?”

There is the parallel with Moses. When the people were led by Moses, God fed them miraculously daily with manna. The story is told in Exodus 16. Each morning the ground around the camp was wet with dew. When it evaporated a fine flaky substance was left on the ground. Each household was to gather as much as they needed.

Ex 16:17 (NLT)

So the people of Israel did as they were told. Some gathered a lot, some only a little. ¹⁸ But when they measured it out, everyone had just enough. Those who gathered a lot had nothing left over, and those who gathered only a little had enough. Each family had just what it needed. ²¹ After this the people gathered the food morning by morning, each family according to its need. And as the sun became hot, the flakes they had not picked up melted and disappeared.

Then through Moses’ ministry they received bread from heaven; now Jesus has fed them miraculously with bread. The people got it. A great prophet was with them.

John 6:14

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.

Who is the Prophet they referred to? Well for that we need to go back to Moses’ words in Deuteronomy 18:18:

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account.

They were right. Jesus was the Prophet that Moses said would come. But there interpretation was wrong in wanting to make him their king who would throw off the Roman oppression. So Jesus goes away by himself to escape their attention.

Collection of the Left-overs

I'd like to step back a little in the account. In verse 12 we read:

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

The baskets were those people used to carry food with them. As the disciples go about collecting the remaining broken pieces of bread, they fill twelve baskets with fragments of the five loaves which originally fitted into one basket. What the point? I think they were to see that there was more than was needed. In fact, after being told early in Mark 6 not to take food with them when they went on mission, now twelve disciples collect twelve baskets of food. Maybe on this occasion there were twelve basketsful because there were twelve disciples collecting and when their baskets were full, the fragments ran out.

With Elisha there was an abundance as well – "they had some left over." Earlier in the same chapter about Elisha there is other story of provision: the widow's cruse.

2 Kings 4:1-7 (NLT)

One day the widow of a member of the group of prophets came to Elisha and cried out, "My husband who served you is dead, and you know how he feared the LORD. But now a creditor has come, threatening to take my two sons as slaves." ² "What can I do to help you?" Elisha asked. "Tell me, what do you have in the house?" "Nothing at all, except a flask of olive oil," she replied. ³ And Elisha said, "Borrow as many empty jars as you can from your friends and neighbors." ⁴ Then go into your house with your sons and shut the door behind you. Pour olive oil from your flask into the jars, setting each one aside when it is filled." ⁵ So she did as she was told. Her sons kept bringing jars to her, and she filled one after another. ⁶ Soon every container was full to the brim! "Bring me another jar," she said to one of her sons. "There aren't any more!" he told her. And then the olive oil stopped flowing. ⁷ When she told the man of God what had happened, he said to her, "Now sell the olive oil and pay your debts, and you and your sons can live on what is left over."

When all the containers were full, the miraculous flow of oil stopped. No matter how much each household collected of the manna, they had the right amount for the people there and the rest of the manna simply melted away. At the feeding of the 5000, when all the baskets were full the multiplication of fragments stopped. In each case of the multiplication of food there was more than was needed and everyone got enough.

I am reminded of the building of this church. We did not have enough to start the building work – we were short by \$67,000. We held a gift day and over the period of a fortnight \$152,000 was pledged. As we went on through the project, there were many additional expenses imposed on us. We had a contingency fund of \$35,000 and four times I went back the treasurer to ask how much was still available for contingencies each time the answer was between 30-35,000 in spite of our continuing to draw on it. When the project for the new building was completed and paid for, we still had 3x,000 in the building fund. We worked our way through the renovation of the old church which cost about \$200,000 and by the end of that there was about \$7,000 left in the building fund. Finally, the installation of heat pump brought about the closure of that fund. It was a real case of the widow's cruse.

There is an obvious conclusion from the feeding of the 5000 that Jesus is a great prophet. Elisha was more powerful in the miraculous than Elijah and Jesus seems to be more powerful still. This is the Prophet that Moses said would come. There is also the implicit provision of generous provision for God's people. Just as Elisha and Moses provided for the widow's debt, the prophets meal and the people's hunger, so Jesus provided for the need of the people following him.

When we are in need, when we lack, we can call out to Jesus for provision. Like the widow, the prophets and those following Jesus, it may be that we need to provide something to be multiplied. Elisha asked her, "What do you have in your house?" She had oil and as she poured that out, there was more. The prophets were hungry and someone brought a few loaves. As they were served they were enough to feed 100 men. The followers of Jesus were hungry and a young boy's lunch fed 5000 and provided for at least another 12 men afterwards.

Maybe in your life there is lack. What have you got that you can give to Jesus, so he can increase it?

- The widow had to obey although it must have seemed ridiculous to pour the oil into containers.
- Elisha and the servant had to obey God's word to them and serve a small meal to a large group.
- The small boy would like to have eaten his lunch himself but when he offered it for others, it was returned to him and everyone else in plenty.

Elsewhere, Jesus said, "Give and it will be given to you – a good measure pressed down, shaken together and running over will men pour into your laps" ¹

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¹ Luke 6:38