

Matthew 14:13–21

¹³ When Jesus heard of it [the death of John the Baptist], he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. The crowds heard of this and followed him on foot from their towns. ¹⁴ When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, and he cured their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples approached him and said, “This is a deserted place and it is already late; dismiss the crowds so that they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves.” ¹⁶ (Jesus) said to them, “There is no need for them to go away; give them some food yourselves.” ¹⁷ But they said to him, “Five loaves and two fish are all we have here.” ¹⁸ Then he said, “Bring them here to me,” ¹⁹ and he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ They all ate and were satisfied, and they picked up the fragments left over—twelve wicker baskets full. ²¹ Those who ate were about five thousand men, not counting women and children. (Matthew 14:13–21)



Image credit: *The Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes*, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (c. 1667–1682) a work study from the National galleries of Scotland for the original painting in Seville

Context

From the several weeks of parables we have heard over the previous several Sundays, the Gospel of Matthew returns to the narrative in which Jesus' miracles increasingly become the source of controversies. R.T. France outlines this section as follows noting the varying response to Jesus' teaching and miracles (13:54–16:20)

- Nazareth rejects Jesus (13:54–58) - questioning the source of his wisdom and deeds of power - and taking offense at him. “*A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and in his own house.*”
- Herod Antipas thinks Jesus is John the Baptist revived (14:1–12)
- **Jesus feeds a large crowd (14:13–21) – our gospel reading this Sunday**
- Jesus walks on the water (14:22–33)
- The popularity of Jesus as a healer (14:34–36)
- Dispute with Pharisees and scribes over defilement (15:1–20)
- A Gentile woman's faith (15:21–28)
- Healing ministry among the Gentiles (15:29–31)
- Second feeding of a crowd (15:32–39)
- Jesus' repudiation of Pharisees and Sadducees (16:1–12)
- Jesus is the Messiah (16:13–20)

Stories of the rejection of Jesus will be interrupted by three miracle stories, the first of which is the miraculous feeding of the 5,000. The narrative is introduced by Jesus' suspicion concerning Herod's interest in him causing him to depart to a deserted place, but the crowds follow. After curing some of the sick, Jesus provides enough food for five thousand men, plus women and children (vv. 15–21). There is a pattern to Matthew's narrative in which miracle and confrontation ebb and flow – and in the midst are accounts of faith and disbelief. The narrative plays out the parables that preceded it: the net is indeed cast wide and all kinds of fish, wheat, weeds, and more are caught in the net of the Kingdom.

The parables that are especially notable in Matthew 13 (*a day of parables*) are focused and revolve around the phrase, “the kingdom of heaven is like...”, making clear it is in contrast to the kingdom of this world. That contrast between the two kingdoms continues and this time using the setting of the banquet. In the passage immediately preceding our gospel, King Herod presides over a banquet whose excess results in the death of John the Baptist. Herein Jesus presides over a banquet, not in a palace but in the wilderness, not among the powerful but rather the weak and poor, and results in life.

Imagery

Eugene Boring (323-4) notes that this miracles account appears six times in the NT gospels and incorporates a wide variety of imagery from Scripture, as well as the Jewish and Christian traditions. Looking to all the various accounts, Boring lists the prominent imagery:

- the wilderness setting for the people of God en route from captivity to the promised land
- recalcitrant Israelites / disciples, who doubt that food can be provided in the wilderness (Ex. 16:2-3);
- God leads the people who are like sheep without a shepherd as the narrative calls to mind Ps 23 and its green grass;
- the giving of manna (Ex 16, Nb 11);
- Elisha's miraculous provision of food (2 Kings 4:42-44) in which there are provisions left over;
- Jesus, accused of being a glutton (Mt 11:19) provided table fellowship for all;
- Jesus' Eucharistic last meal with his disciples in which he takes on the role of the head of the new family, providing food and pronouncing the blessing; and
- the messianic banquet as part of the gathering of all creation seen in the bread and sea creatures.

The imagery points across the full breadth of salvation history, pointing to Jesus' fulfillment as the “great prophet like Moses” and the Exodus experience, keying upon the miraculous feeding by Elisha in 2 Kings, pointing forward to the Last Supper and institution of the Eucharist, as well as indicating the breaking in of the Kingdom of Heaven in the typology of the great banquet with so much food that everyone had their fill and there are still foods leftover.

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will provide for all peoples a feast of rich food and choice wines, juicy, rich food and pure, choice wines. (Isaiah 25:6)

Commentary

The miraculous feeding of a very large number of people in the wilderness is one miracle that is told in each of the four canonical gospels. Despite the consistency of the narrative there are, in every age, those who reject the miraculous offering that Jesus only inspired the people to share. Or they dismiss the narrative as apocryphal – or at best an altered memory of a large feast that imagined the coming banquet of the Kingdom. Keener (403) points out that nothing would be more memorable than a feeding miracle, especially in the context of the culture of their day. Keener offers four points:

1. First, the disciples were right to be concerned about the people's hunger but intended to solve the problem in a purely natural way (e.g. 1 Kings 17:16 and 2 Kings 4:43). Our expectations of what God can do often are too small; providing food in the wilderness was technically impossible, but God had used Moses, Elijah and Elisha for feeding miracles.
2. Second, like God of the Hebrew scriptures, Jesus takes what his servants bring to him and multiplies it. (Ex 4:1-3; 2 Kings 4:1-7)
3. Third, God does miracles only when his people need them – and the need is very evident in this wilderness area.
4. Fourth, sharing is not the narrative thrust of Matthew's writing. The ending points to things outside and beyond the people present: (a) we are not to be intimidated by the magnitude of the problem because God is with us, and (b) the surprising leftovers point to the continuation of this miracle (greater than manna which had no leftovers) into the Apostolic Age.

Adding to Keener's insight, there is also the clear Eucharistic intention in the use of four verbs 'take', 'bless', 'break' and 'give' which occur with minor variations not only in all six accounts of the two miraculous feedings and in that of the Emmaus meal, but also in all four accounts of the Last Supper.

That being said, at the event itself, the Eucharistic foretaste would be unknown and so Keener's understanding of the event in Old Testament terms is appropriate.

When Jesus heard of it he withdrew (v.13). News of John's imprisonment by Antipas and now the report of John's death has the same effect. As in 12:15 and 15:21 the withdrawal takes him away from a place of danger or confrontation. A direct confrontation with Antipas would not advance Jesus' mission and, in the light of what had happened to John, was a risk to be avoided, especially in view of Antipas' view of Jesus as a new John.

Matthew makes it clear that Jesus is seeking not just safety but also solitude for himself and his disciples. The disciples are not mentioned at this point, but their presence is always assumed when Matthew speaks of Jesus traveling (not least by boat, which needed a crew), and they will be present in v.15 (*"When the disciples approached"*). In the meantime the "neighborhood wire" is active, passing along the news that Jesus of Nazareth is in the area – and the crowds gather. Despite Jesus' desire for solitude, he is now too popular to escape notice.

his heart was moved with pity for them (v.14). Given the sense in which "pity" is used in American English, many translations are opting for the appropriate "compassion." Remember that Jesus' short term objective was solitude and prayer. Yet his response is compassion for the people who have come to see him (whatever their motives) and are without food. It is the response of God to his people, and perhaps as importantly, it is the response of the Good Samaritan, the one who discerns God's call to carry out God's will. It is the response to the very human situation.

"This is a deserted place and it is already late; dismiss the crowds so that they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves." The disciples are right to be concerned. Few towns were nearby, and towns were generally small, at most accommodating only a few visitors in towns of a few hundred people. Further, most of the day's bread would be consumed by evening (Mt 14:15). It would have been nearly impossible for roughly ten thousand people (five thousand men plus women and children-v. 21) to fend for themselves in the countryside.

Given the numbers involved, Jesus' response, *"You give them something to eat,"* must have seemed like a hollow joke; cf. Elisha's similar command to his servant, 2 Kgs 4:42–43. Even their own provisions of five loaves and two fish are not enough for a group of thirteen. So had they been expecting to find hospitality (as in 10:9–13) somewhere nearby, despite the isolation of the area? If so,

the arrival of the large crowd had upset their calculations. To surrender even this meager provision to Jesus was either an act of reckless obedience or evidence of a more confident faith in Jesus than we have seen the disciples displaying elsewhere.

Taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples. But there is more to this meal than physical sustenance; eating together is a symbol of unity. Instead of being dismissed and dispersed (v. 15), the crowds are welcomed into a new community. Once gathered Jesus takes on the role of the head of the family evident in the actions of blessing and giving. Blessed is the normal giving of thanks before a meal, the responsibility of the head of the Jewish family. The actions and words are the same as those in the meal at Emmaus (Luke 24:30), and no doubt in other meals where Jesus presided over the disciple ‘family’. It is striking that the four verbs ‘take’, ‘bless’, ‘break’ and ‘give’ occur with minor variations not only in all six accounts of the two miraculous feedings and in that of the Emmaus meal, but also in all four accounts of the Last Supper (including 1 Cor. 11:23–24). It was a daily Jewish ritual, but in Christian memory it became filled with fuller meaning, as both these experiences in the ‘lonely place’ and the last meal in the upper room pointed forward to that great feast at which Jesus would be host to all his people of every race.

Bread and fish were basic Galilean rations; it was a very ordinary meal. But the command to sit down (*anaklinomai*, literally ‘recline’), while it may only reflect the effect of being on the ground rather than at table, may also be a hint of the more formal banquet at which guests reclined on couches. This is not a casual snack, but a formal occasion. While a meal of bread and fish with no wine is hardly a ‘banquet’, it symbolizes the gathering of the people of God which will be consummated then. John clearly saw in this event a eucharistic element, and while this specific connotation belongs to the period after the Last Supper, it is not surprising that the incident came to be seen in the light of the Last Supper, itself a symbol of communion, and a foretaste of the Messianic banquet (26:29).

And now what...

Many times I have heard (or read) a reflection, sermon, or commentary that dismisses miracles and then turns to other explanations. Most often heard is that Jesus got the people present to share what they already had – “that is the real miracle” – or so goes the commentary. Recently while reading a site I routinely peruse, I was surprised to see, “I wonder if the “miracle” of the feeding is not so much what Jesus does as what happens among the crowds in the presence of Jesus.” My thoughts were instantly, “Seriously.....are we gonna’ do the ‘sharing is the real miracle’ thing?” The author continued:

“Maybe the crowds experienced the transformative power of Christ's presence when he ordered them to make themselves comfortable on the grass, as if they were honored guests at a meal. And when he blessed the loaves, the crowd sensed this meal was special. Perhaps as the disciples moved through the crowds distributing the food, no one feared there wouldn't be enough, and so they didn't think of themselves and their own needs. The men shared with their wives and sisters and mothers, and the children were fed first. Maybe Jesus' compassion was contagious in the way they cared for each other. And Jesus' healing touch inspired them to be grateful for a simple meal abundant by wilderness standards.”

While in no way dismissing the miracle, there are some important questions raised along the lines, “and now what...” In the Christian endeavor the answer is inevitably “on-going conversion” or “transformation” or some expression that says the special wilderness meal is not the end-point, but only the beginning. So too with the Eucharist, the encounter with Christ in the breaking of the bread, is only the beginning.

The beginning of what? Compassion for others because of the compassion Christ has for us? Taking on the seemingly non-sensible, wilderness-impossible project because we are told “*give them some food yourselves?*” Becoming active in the distribution of God’s graces and gifts?

It is one of the questions we all face: “... and now what?”

Notes

Matthew 14:13–21 – *general*: The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle of Jesus that is recounted in all four gospels. The principal reason for that may be that it was seen as anticipating the Eucharist and the final banquet in the kingdom (Mt 8:11; 26:29), but it looks not only forward but backward, to the feeding of Israel with manna in the desert at the time of the Exodus (Ex 16), a miracle that in some contemporary Jewish expectation would be repeated in the messianic age (2 Bar 29:8). It may also be meant to recall Elisha’s feeding a hundred men with small provisions (2 Kgs 4:42–44).

Matthew 14:13 *a deserted place*: *erēmōm*, wilderness

Matthew 14:14 *had pity on them*: *esplanchenisthē*, to have compassion. A word used in Matthew and Luke to indicate the compassion of God for humans, or as in the case of the Good Samaritan, people to gauge and discern the will of God and take that same action in the world.

Matthew 14:17 *five loaves and two fish*: there is no clear symbolic significance to the numbers “5” and “2” in combination.

Matthew 14:19 *Taking...said the blessing...broke the loaves, and gave...*: correspond to the actions of Jesus over the bread at the Last Supper (Mt 26:26). Since they were usual at any Jewish meal, that correspondence does not necessarily indicate a eucharistic reference here. Matthew’s silence about Jesus’ dividing the fish among the people (Mk 6:41) is perhaps more significant in that regard.

Matthew 14:20 *the fragments left over*: as in Elisha’s miracle, food was left over after all had been fed. The word fragments (Greek *klasmata*) is used, in the singular, of the broken bread of the Eucharist in Didache 9:3–4.

Matthew 14:21 *five thousand men, not counting women and children*: Interestingly, the Greek phrase can also mean “without women and children” and could point to this as a male only gathering. But what would it mean for 5,000 men to gather with Jesus in an isolated place? Hard to say, but some commentators speculate, based on the wording of Mark 6:39–40, that this is a military-like gathering [“So he gave orders to have them sit down in groups on the green grass. The people took their places in rows by hundreds and by fifties.”] On this understanding the feeding in the wilderness was the turning-point in Jesus’ Galilean ministry, when he decisively rejected a popular demand that he assume a role of political leadership.

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