

St. Mary Magdalen, Oxford

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Today's gospel must be one of the most well known stories about Jesus in the New Testament. It is the feeding of the 5,000 – and as Matthew points out, this number was only the men present: it did not include the women and children who were clearly there too.

The scriptures are of course full of stories about food, about feasting and fasting. Food is seen as one of the greatest of God's gifts to humanity – essential to life and well-being; and, of course, symbolic of a far deeper "feeding" than just maintaining human life. Our OT reading from Isaiah (ch.55:1-5) and our psalm (Ps.145) both take up this theme. Particularly powerful for Jews and early Christians were the stories of God's gift of manna in the wilderness, heavenly bread sustaining the Israelites after their flight from Egypt. Feasts and other meals for example are where God is manifest in many ways. At some people entertain angels unaware of who they are. Abraham and Lot are examples (Gen chs18 & 19) King Belshazzar's Feast (Daniel ch. 5) is the occasion for a dire warning.

Jesus told stories about feasts like that of the wedding feast of the King's son, when those invited sent excuses that they could not come. Those who eventually sat down to the feast were the ordinary people from the streets, good and bad, whom the slaves had rounded up to replace the invited guests (Matt. Ch. 22: 1-10) He himself attended both ordinary meals and feasts like the wedding feast at Cana, and meals with sinners and those who thought they were righteous. Then there was the final feast of his earthly life - the Last Supper, which he had longed to share with his friends. It is therefore hardly surprising that from the earliest times Christians saw the Kingdom of Heaven as a Feast, just as Jews saw the Messianic age as a banquet.

Our experience of lockdown in early 2020 has underlined the importance of food in our society too. Early on we saw

panic buying – people feeling threatened of being without what they took for granted. There has been a necessary resurgence of home cooking and culinary experimentation. People who perhaps pay little attention to their gardens have started growing their own own food. We also know rather more about the misuses of food if national waistlines are anything to go by. Then of course there has been the absence of “food fellowship” – that entertaining and eating together which reinforces so many social bonds.

Digging a little deeper, food is in many societies a marker of status and of deprivation. Among Hindus, vegetarianism is a mark of high ritual status. In our society fresh and good quality raw materials for meals and exotic ingredients alike are the preserve of the richer and those who can afford to shop in high quality food shops. Whereas low quality and junk food is often what the poorest in our society can afford. What’s more, amongst the most deprived the loss over several generations of basic cooking skills has compounded this, and the health consequences are clear. (I remember some years ago visiting a Newcastle parish of which my college is the Patron. Before meeting the parish officers on behalf of the patronage committee I wandered round, looking at the housing and a modern shopping precinct, trying to get a sense of the parish. What struck me was the absence of any shop selling fresh fruit or vegetables.) In so many ways, then food is a religious issue.

But it is not about food in general I want to speak today but about the gospel story; and to ask how we should read it.

It is a happy coincidence that our gospel reading is set so soon after the day (last Friday) when the church remembers Ignatius of Loyala. His teachings have influenced the way many Christians read the gospels and have been enabled to “hear” Christ speaking to them in new ways.

Ignatius was a Spaniard, living in the first half of the 16th C Recovering from a serious battle wound, he had a religious experience which changed his life, and led him to co-found the Society of Jesus, a new religious order whose members became known as Jesuits. The Jesuits have had a chequered history, sometimes disliked and

feared by those inside and outside their own church, but often having a very important role in mission and in education. (It is not surprising that today's Jesuits operate many university chaplaincies, including our own in Oxford.) From the later 20C onwards their spiritual practices have become widely known and appreciated ecumenically. Perhaps 3 practices are most significant. The first is the practice of the *Spiritual Exercises* based on a book written almost exactly 500 years ago by Ignatius himself. It is a 30-day retreat programme designed to enable retreatants with the help of a retreat conductor to reflect on their lives and to discern where God might be calling them. 30 days means a big investment of time and money so often this is now divided up into shorter periods or organised so that it can be done at home. Then there is the practice of the Examen – replaying the day and asking oneself what one's responses to the day's experiences tell one about one's relationship with God. Ignatius told his brothers that the Examen was even more important than saying the daily office. It is certainly true that many people find it a way of realising that God is concerned with every aspect of their lives, and that He uses everything we do and everyone we meet to show us the way to Him, if we will develop a discerning heart. Thirdly Ignatian spirituality offers a distinctive way of meditating on the gospel stories (which Ignatius himself discovered initially in a book by the 14th C Ludolph of Saxony, *De Vita Christi*): its purpose is to enable the Christian to come closer to the person of Jesus and to listen to him.

The feeding of the 5,000 lends itself to this sort of "reading". Typically it might take about half an hour. One visualises the deserted place and the crowds which have gathered even though Jesus was seeking rest with his closest friends. One looks at Jesus as a living figure who has compassion on the sick and heals them, and won't send them away to buy food for themselves as evening comes, even though his friends are getting anxious about the situation. He offers them miraculous food – from just 5 loaves and 2 fish, and there is a lot left over after everyone has been satisfied. The person reading and contemplating identifies with someone in the story – a disciple perhaps, or a member of the crowd, or perhaps someone who has been healed. He or she then walks through the story, feeling the place and the people's needs, seeing the Lord, and being ready to hear him speaking specifically to him or her. It is a way of

reading scripture which uses the human imagination as a way of opening oneself to the presence and words of the living Christ.

Of course not everyone finds this sort of meditation helpful. We tend to find God and be found by him in different ways: and mercifully there are many spiritual traditions which can help us, according to our characters and inclinations and backgrounds. Many will find it more helpful to read such stories with a more intellectual understanding of the literary and historical background and the deeper meaning of the miracle.

If this suits us best then we need to understand the literary genre of the story and the need to ask what it means beyond its apparently face value. The miracle stories were of a kind well known among Jewish spiritual writers at the time. They were primarily a means of teaching theology through stories and vivid pictures, and those who heard or read them would have understood that they disclosed deeper meanings. As St. Augustine wrote several centuries later, "Let us ask the miracles themselves what they can tell us about Christ, for they have a tongue of their own, if it can only be understood." Christians still have to learn to read the miracles, not just to look at them. To do this we need to know the Old Testament background and its echoes, and as a result ask what this would have meant to those who told the story and first heard it.

The miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 clearly echoes the feeding of the children of Israel in the desert with heavenly manna. So Jesus is portrayed as the new Moses. He is also linked to the prophetic tradition and fulfils it, because in 2 Kings chapter 4 we read the story of Elisha too feeding 100 people in the desert from just a few loaves. The parallels are striking. Elisha's servant queries how on earth he can feed so many with so little. But he does what his master orders and there was enough and some left over. Just as in the story of the Transfiguration where Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus to Peter, James and John, so here in the feeding miracle Jesus is portrayed as the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets. He is the very Word of God, sent to feed his people. It is striking that in John's gospel (Ch.6) just after the miracle of the 5,000

the writer places Jesus's teaching about himself as the Bread of Life, sent by the Father to give life to the world.

But we have to go even further to grasp the inner meaning of this miracle story. Contemplating the compassionate Christ providing for those who had sought him out in a desert place, we are led to see the great compassion God has for those he has created, He pours out on them overwhelming gifts, far greater than they "either desire or deserve" as one of our collects puts it. (Collect for Trinity 12 in Common Worship. It goes back via the Prayer Books of 1662 and 1549 to the Sarum Missal.) As Christians from the earliest times understood this miracle, and the underlying vision of outpouring grace, it represented the Eucharist. The gospel account of Jesus taking the five loaves, looking to heaven, blessing and breaking them clearly echoes his actions at the Last Supper. Here Christ gives himself to his followers – as the true bread from God, as the very Word of God made flesh, in a shared feast which is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

If we have learned to read this miracle, as St. Augustine suggested, we know that we, too, are part of this story, this miracle of heavenly food. We, too, are invited to share together in the life Christ comes to bring, every time we "do this" in remembrance of Him.