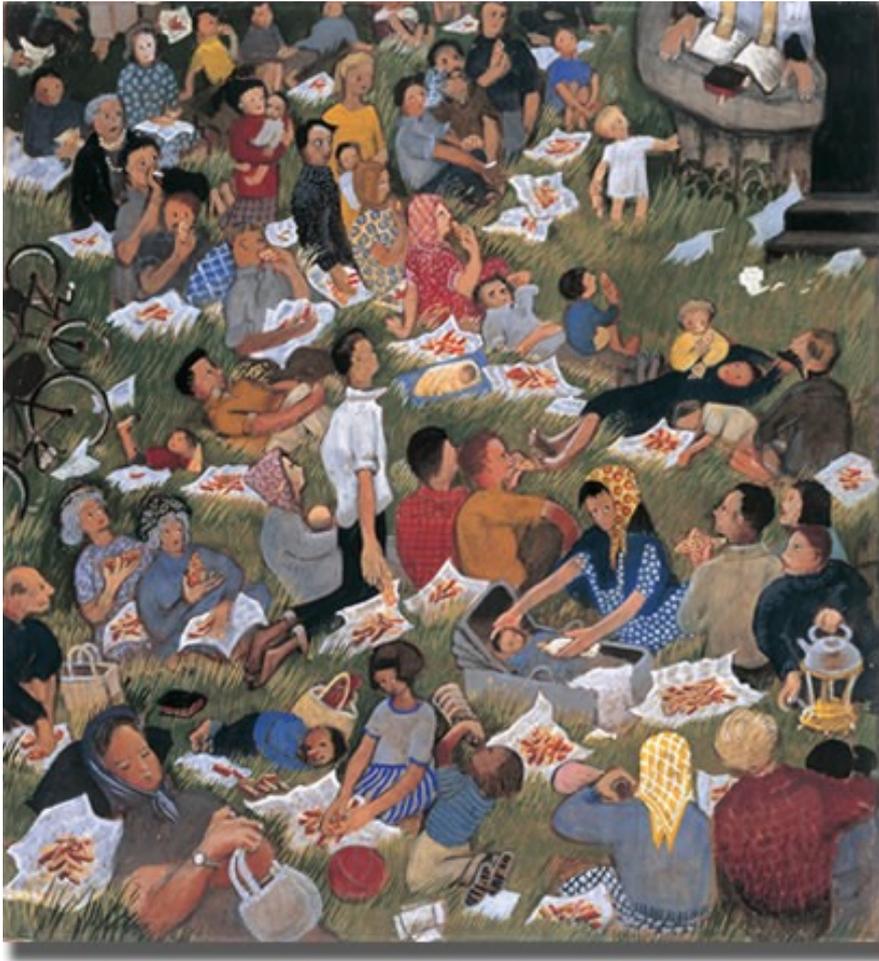


Storms and Picnics Week 1 Sermon



Spend a moment looking at the image of Eularia Clarke's *The Five Thousand* which is part of the Methodist Modern Art Collection.

What do you notice?

How does it make you feel?

How does it fit with the way you imagined and entered into the story?

It's an image full of exuberance, of life in abundance.

In it there are people of all ages:

- babies crying,
- grans looking after the children,
- dads boiling kettles and play fighting with children ,
- granddads eating chips,
- mums lying down and nursing babies,
- toddlers toddling,
- children drinking
- and so much more...

Looking at this close up of one section of the crowd it's easy to imagine the field as endless, the crowd as infinite. The image gives us no boundary, no edge to the scene. There is no real sense of perspective, but instead feels as though we are among the crowd and overwhelmed by them. It seems part of a patchwork: there could be hundreds more squares to picture just as diverse as this one with the people just as full of life and just as hungry.

Was it this that the disciples saw when Jesus asked them to feed the crowd?

An endless insatiable need, impossible to meet and satisfy?

Did they feel overwhelmed?

It's not just that they haven't got enough food with them, even an unimaginably large amount of money and more shops than they could get to would only give the people a taste.

They see the scene as one of need and of scarcity, austerity if you like.

Even Andrew, who at least makes a stab at a solution, seems to do so with words that sing with poverty and futility:

"There is a little boy here who has five barley loaves and two dried fish - but what are these among so many people?"

Even the hope is eclipsed by his expectation of failure -

here's a tiny portion of the poorest and roughest of bread
- no craft bakery's best,
not even soft and easy to digest supermarket sliced,
but heavy barley loaves that require slow chewing
and with them dried fish - no succulence or richness

If you put yourself in the place of the disciples, is this how you feel?

Are you overwhelmed by the need?

Are you thinking why me?

Couldn't they just have remembered their own lunch?

There's a wonderful conversation on QI about this where David Mitchell angrily berates Jesus for not teaching people to plan better!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7HUupdcfUHg&feature=em-share_video_user

Jimmy Carr:

It's not that, the feeding of the five thousand? Like there's five thousand people and they wanted some bread and fish. I reckon that was just about four and a half thousand people going, "What have we got, bread and fish? I'm all right, thanks. I'll have something when I get home."

David Mitchell:

It's also . . . The other interesting thing, thing about that story is that out of the five thousand people, only two of them had thought to bring any food.

Stephen Fry:

Yes.

David

And so in a way it's, okay, good miracle, but the other side of it is 4,998 idiots . . . with no sense of foresight at all, and Jesus doesn't . . . doesn't make them learn a lesson from that!

Stephen

You're right.

David

It's all fine. They . . . They . . . They lived on--

Stephen

He said, "This is the sermon on the Mount. This isn't Glastonbury," he could have said, couldn't he?

David

But, you know, he ought to say, "You didn't bring any food! Of course there's not gonna be any food! Think about it!"

Stephen

Yeah. Yeah.

David

"Plan next time! Judea would be better if people planned!" But no. "Yeah, it always works out fine; Jesus'll magic up some grub!" No! He's gonna get crucified one day, and then what are you gonna eat?

Is this sometimes how we feel faced with the needs of the world, or even merely of ourselves and those closest to us?

Are we too overwhelmed?

Do we see no end to the need and no chance of resources to meet it?

Do we see ourselves, like the TV commercial, searching under beds, in the bottom of bags, behind seat cushions for a collection of pennies when we need pounds, for crumbs when we need lorry loads of loaves?

Is this the only way to see it?
Look again
Look at the reading and the picture

In the top right hand corner of the picture, almost out of sight is a communion table and, in place of Jesus, the hands of a minister who disappears off the picture's edge. Around him, enjoying plentiful fish and chips, people are sat, lying or standing on abundant grass. If you look at the reading it's mentioned there too.

'Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all'

Is this a deliberate echo of today's Psalm? I think it may be: the mention of plentiful grass should remind us that we are in the care of God, our shepherd, at whose table we will find our cup overflowing and a feast in our honour.

Just imagine that party, that picnic... with God doing the catering and you as guest of honour...

That is what Jesus sees as he looks out at the crowd and at the little boy's packed lunch. He sees not scarcity and hopelessness but abundance and promise.

In looking at the little boy and his gift
he sees not a little boy but a large heart
and not false hope but the makings of plenty and provision.

And so he gives, not just a taste but an all you can eat banquet!
Until everyone has all they want, no rationing,
each met in their need as an individual...
...and then, because all God's gifts and God's people are precious,
he gathers what's left to be treasured and used so that the abundance
can bless more.

Could we be called to see the world and its need in this way?
To look for plenty, rather than worrying about scarcity?
To treat all we have been given as precious and create plenty by not
wasting it?

Thinking about our lives and the life of the world in this way could transform us.



So what is our response?

... look again at the painting.

...There's an intriguing figure in the foreground: a woman looking away from everyone else, arms folded around her handbag.

She doesn't seem to be eating -

- maybe she doesn't like fish and chips

- maybe she doubts that there's such a thing as a free lunch and is worried about the bill

maybe she thinks that religious teachers should stick to preaching and caterers to catering.

...who knows

...for whatever reason she's distanced from the crowd, still hungry and disapproving

Is this our response?
One that will impoverish ourselves and others?
Or are we responding wholeheartedly :
joining in the picnic,
playing with the children,
chatting with the adults,
and offering our small picnic to be blessed and shared
and our kettle to make the tea?

