

Sermon/ drama/ etc



Look at John Reilly's painting, The feeding of the five thousand, for a moment

How does it make you feel?

What strikes you about it?

It seems to be a story of healing as well as feeding.

In the picture the groups on either side of Jesus are the same people but the atmosphere and emotion they project is very different:

- on the right of Jesus they seem filled with anguish, anxiety and need.
- They seem almost to be fighting over the food in front of them.
- Each seems to try to press their claim on the food by taking hold of the plate or holding their hands out in entreaty.
- The postures are awkward and twisted.
- Their faces hold expressions of defeat and tiredness (just look at the bags under their eyes!).
- They're squeezed together, held fast and constricted by their need.

- Their world holds no colour
- The darkness of the earlier storm echoes around them and mutes even their own colour.

Yet in the middle of them there is the hint of promise

- the loaves gently glow with colour and hope.

Then on Jesus' left, the after part of this before and after picture, the scene has more space, more air and light

- each person has their own place to stand and stands tall, posture strong within it
- each person has their own basket and seems to hold it confidently and gently, their arms more rounded
- and although they are more spread out, it seems as if the figures are more connected
- feet and arms touch or almost touch
- and postures are echoed across each person in the group
- It feels as if they have gone from being competitors to being community
- their faces now have colour and life
- they look at Jesus or the food and it's almost possible to feel their connection and emotion.

whereas before it was difficult to see them as anything other than a mass, a crowd, now it's possible to see them as individuals

- you may find yourself drawn into imagining their stories
 - who are they?
 - where did they come from?
 - why had they come?

Could it be that, in painting this picture, John Reilly is meditating on our possible responses to the abundance of God's life?

- the shut down response that says
 - “this talk of abundance is all very well but it's a fairy tale, life's just not like that”
- as opposed to the response that is overwhelmed by God's generosity and responds with generosity as a result.

In talking about the miracle of the feeding and explanations of how it happens many people have suggested the same story:

The people flocked to hear Jesus from great distances away into a place where they knew there would be no food

- of course they packed food for themselves
- not to do so would be inconceivable and ridiculous.

But as stomachs started to grumble and a mealtime came each person began to doubt that everyone else had brought food.

Now it was a moral custom of this place that if a traveller arrived with no food you shared with them what you had. So each person looked around and thought of their own tiny meal in their bag and worried that if they brought it out they wouldn't even get to taste a crumb. So, deciding they'd rather be hungry with food in their bags than risk getting the food out and having to share, each person kept their bag shut and their stomach grumbling.

Each person, that is, other than one small boy, still young enough to believe that Father Christmas, fairies and free lunches exist! He believes in miracles and God's abundance and has not yet learnt to protect himself from disappointments nor to expect them. And so, because it's the obvious thing to do when everyone's hungry, he gets out his food and offers to share.

Now, I imagine, there was a chorus of muttered 'stupid boy' comments and tutting, maybe a few said 'aw isn't that sweet' 'what a lovely boy'. Followed by people sat, arms crossed waiting to be proved right and the boy to be taught a hard lesson in how the world works.

And then the miracle -

in the waiting, under the gaze of Jesus and the boy, people's minds begin to wander to their own bags. The betraying smell of their food seems to grow stronger. The lump showing where the food sits seems large enough to be seen from space, let alone by the person sitting next to them.

And so slowly, and possibly reluctantly, bags are untied and opened and food emerges. People begin to compare what they've brought and exchange bits of food and recipes. Conversations start and community is made as barriers, fear and self-protection is dropped.

Now, you may or may not think that explaining away miracles is a good idea, but, rather than using it to explain away the miracle, why not think of this story as a commentary on the miracle of feeding and the conversation which we begin to look at this week and that will be our focus for 3 more weeks?

When Jesus is found by the crowd on the other side of the lake, their searching and his response echo a question that resounds through John's Gospel from beginning to end:
What are you looking for?

- What are you looking for?

Jesus asks the disciples when they first approach him (John 1:38)

- Who are you looking for?

Jesus asks those come to arrest him in Gethsemane (John 18:4)

- Who are you looking for?

Jesus asks Mary Magdalene by the empty tomb (John 20:15)

Here the question does not appear explicitly but echoes in the crowd's searching and Jesus' response:

- What are you looking for?

- A free lunch

- or God's action

Jesus's response to the crowd's question makes it clear

'Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.'

It's a question which echoes from John's earlier comment at the end of the feeding of the crowd

14 When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'

15 When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

The crowd want the security of a human

- to provide food and to lead them,
- to show them how to do the work of God.

They want a step by step guide rather than being told merely to believe in the one God has sent.

It echoes also in the crowd's references to manna in the wilderness and to Moses providing it. The story in Exodus is one of repeated complaints by the people, nearly always beginning with "It would have been better if we had not left Egypt and slavery..."

- they're thirsty
 - "It would have been better if we had not left..."
- they're hungry
 - "It would have been better if we had not left..."

The writer of Exodus seems to deliberately show us two opposite views of the world:

- God's view where Egypt is a place of death and oppression and the desert is a place of life
- and the people's view where the desert is a place of death and Egypt a place of life but oppression.

Like the people in the right of John Reilly's picture, they seem shut off from knowledge and expectation of God's care and action by their own assumptions, their inability to trust and believe.

And when God does provide they choose not to believe God's promise that the food will be there every day. So they attempt to stock pile taking more than their share.

In John's Gospel we hear again of the people's wish to rely on human sources of leadership when they describe God's act of feeding in the wilderness as that of Moses rather than God. In this they also echo their ancestors not only in the wilderness but also those in the Books of Judges and Samuel

- Those ancestors who were part of God's nation with God as king but who wanted a human king to be like everyone else and to have security.
- those ancestors who carried God with them in a simple tent and an ark of God's words but sought to build a magnificent temple and place God's presence in one place in one city.

The alternative answer is the one that echoes through John's Gospel as a response to that question

"What are you looking for?"

Come and See -

- the signs of God's love and life

Come and believe in what you have seen Trust in the abundance of God's life and that life will be open to you

So which side of the picture are we?

Are we willing to be open to God's impossible possibilities that can make the desert bloom and become a place of life, blessing and abundance?

Or do we still imagine that life isn't like that and struggle on in our own strength seeing bread but not the sign of God's gift?

When we hear Jesus' words

...it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is that which_[g] comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.'

Can we say with the crowd
'Sir, give us this bread always.'