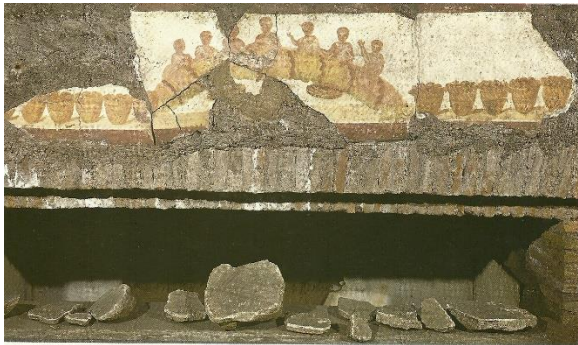


Sermon Christ Church Cathedral 28 July 2024

2 Kings 4:42-44; Psalm 145:10-19; Eph 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

The story of Jesus multiplying five loaves of bread and two fish so that, even after about five thousand people had eaten their fill, there were still twelve baskets full of left-overs is the one miracle of Jesus that is found in all four gospels. Mark's gospel even has two versions of it. It must have been one of the best-loved and most memorable stories about Jesus.

It figures in the earliest surviving Christian art: a third century wall painting in the catacombs at Rome of people at a meal with twelve baskets of bread in the foreground ...



... and a mosaic showing of a basket of bread flanked by two fish excavated in the remains of a fourth century church near the Sea of Galilee (at Tabgha).



Today we have listened to John's version of the story. At least fifty years of telling and retelling went into this story as it travelled across the Mediterranean world. Eventually, in the late first century, the Evangelist that Church tradition calls John, who probably lived in Ephesus (in present day Turkey), fixed the story in the written form that has come down to us. Here in Ireland we have a wonderful story-telling tradition, so we know how stories can develop in the telling as the *seanachai* enlivens the tale, perhaps adding imaginative details, contemporary references or little touches of humour. So, I thought that today we might reflect on the features that are unique to John's telling of the story.

Only John tells us that ‘the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near.’ This spring festival celebrating Israel’s deliverance from slavery in Egypt was the original Hebrew New Year, a joyful time of singing when nature was renewed, when the winter was past, the rain over and gone, and fragrant flowers were appearing all over the land.

John, uniquely, makes a point of saying that there was much grass in the place. Around the time of Passover, the slopes around the lake known as the Sea of Galilee are covered in the most beautiful lush grass, flecked with wild flowers – for just a few weeks before spring gives way to the scorching heat of summer. Our translation has Jesus saying, ‘Make the people sit down.’ But what he actually said is, ‘Make the people lie down,’ because in the ancient Mediterranean world people normally reclined on couches for meals. This makes Jesus the ‘Good Shepherd’ of Psalm 23 who makes his flock lie down in green pastures beside still waters.

Only John tells us that this happened on a mountain. As John lived in Turkey, he wouldn’t have known that there is no mountain right beside the lake known as the Sea of Galilee. He may not know his geography, but he certainly knows the Scriptures and has read in the book of Ezekiel how God has promised to be a shepherd for the people who will feed them with good pasture, making them lie down by the water courses on the mountains of Israel (Ezek 34).

Only John specifies that the loaves were barley bread. This fits well with the springtime setting as barley could be harvested in spring. It was able to grow in poor soil and was resistant to hot weather. The flat bread made from barley flour was the only bread that many people would have eaten. Wheaten bread was much more expensive. In John’s telling of the story, the barley bread, the bread of the poor, accentuates the echo of the Elisha story that we heard in our first reading. But that was about feeding one hundred people with twenty loaves of barley bread. Jesus feeds five thousand with two loaves, so he surpasses Elisha!

The fish was most likely sardines: the most common fish in the lake. A couple of sardines, possibly dried or salted would be a typical lunch that a Galilean mother would pack for her son.

In all four gospels we hear that Jesus provides food for hungry people in such overflowing abundance that twelve baskets of leftovers are collected up. Today’s psalm speaks beautifully about that open-handed generosity of God in words that have become a familiar grace before meals:

The eyes of all look to you, O Lord

And you give them their food in due season

You open wide your hand

and satisfy the desire of every living creature

Only John has Jesus instructing his disciples to ‘Gather up the fragments left over so that nothing may be lost.’ We who live in a world where food is thrown away by a privileged minority while the majority go hungry every day, might find ourselves reproached and challenged by this command of Jesus to gather up the surplus that nothing may be wasted. Our Environmental Protection Agency here in Ireland estimates that we waste an annual average of 146 kilos of food per person. Maybe too in our world so often disfigured by the left-overs from human consumption—ranging from litter to large-scale industrial waste—it might strike us that Jesus commanded the disciples to clean up after the meal, restoring the landscape. Perhaps Jesus’ words—unique to John’s gospel—‘that nothing may be lost’ (Jn 6.12) might also challenge our acceptance of ‘built in obsolescence’ and inspire us to see recycling as part of our alignment of our lives with the Wisdom that God has inscribed in the creation. ‘A respectful use of all that we need and a willingness to recycle it when it has fulfilled its purpose . . . is . . . the way of nature, which utilizes everything and wastes nothing.’<sup>1</sup>

I wonder if John the story-teller has even added a touch of humour to his version of this scene. Unfortunately, though, it gets lost in translation. John has Jesus telling the disciples to get the people—presumably men, women and children—to lie down on the grass. He then writes, ‘So the men (the males) reclined.’ Presumably in expectation that the food would be brought to them by the women!

A final unique feature of John’s account is that Jesus himself goes through the people reclining on the grass, giving the food to each person individually, all five thousand of them! In the other gospels he gets the disciples to distribute it. John’s gospel puts great emphasis on the close, personal relationship between Jesus and each one his disciples. We often miss out on this precious feature because our modern translations frequently use the plural in order to be inclusive of both men and women. So, we hear, for example, ‘Those who love me will be loved by my Father and I will love them and reveal myself to them.’ (John 14:21). But the point is that the individual woman who loves Jesus will be loved by God his Father and Jesus will love her and reveal himself to her. And the individual man who loves Jesus will be loved by God his Father and Jesus will love him and reveal himself to him.

The reference to Jesus taking the bread and the fish, giving thanks or ‘saying grace’ and then distributing the food to each person has, of course, strong eucharistic overtones. The writing seems to have been intentionally crafted to remind its hearers of what they do every Sunday. In particular, it highlights the

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<sup>1</sup> Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, p. 200.

beautiful moment when a priest or minister stands in for Jesus, as it were, showing to each of us as we draw near to the holy table, the welcoming and generous hospitality of Jesus. We don't do 'self-service' at the eucharist. Inviting people to help themselves would completely undermine the symbolism. Instead, a minister—a servant—gives each of us the bread and cup, modelling what the Father sent Jesus to do. 'I have come,' Jesus says, 'that you may have life and have it abundantly (10:10). 'And now, as the Father sent me, so I send you' (20:21). 'May we who share Christ's body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others.'