He Feeds the Hungry and Treads upon the Waves
Mark 6:30-56

The passage we're looking at today is one of those that makes it into children's bibles, isn't it? The feeding of the 5000, with pictures of happy smiling families enjoying a picnic together. And all the better because it's free!

But there's more to it than that, because this is the only one of Jesus' miracles that's recorded in all four gospels. Think about that. Because Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all write from their different perspectives, and they've got this wealth of material on Jesus to work with, to decide, what do I keep? What do I cut? And this is the only miracle where all of them decided, 'this has got to stay.' Why? What is it about this event that made all four decide, 'they need to hear this'?

Well, it's that it has explanatory power. Look at v51-52. Jesus has just walked on water, which, you've got to admit, just in terms of dramatic effect has got to rival feeding the 5000, and then Mark says, 'They were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves.' Meaning, if they *had* understood about the loaves, if they had taken in what the feeding of the 5000 had told them, they wouldn't have been astounded by Jesus walking on water.

So what does this tell us about Jesus, and why does it matter for you, such that Mark, along with the other 3 gospels says, you've got to hear this?

The Presence of the King
As we saw last week, Jesus had sent the disciples out to teach and heal and cast out demons. And they come back full of what they've been up to, and Jesus says, v31, "Come away by yourselves to a desolate place *and rest a while*." And Mark tells us why. There are so many people coming and going around Jesus that, v31, 'They had no leisure even to eat.' Now, these disciples are all young men. They're the age of the guys in our student and young adult groups. And I have never known any of them to be off their food. There's always time to eat! So for them not to eat, that is busy!

But there's a busyness, there's a level of activity beyond which things cease to be healthy, isn't there, for your body and your soul. And maybe you know what that feels like. You can be overstretched. You're like a rubber band about to break. And Jesus says, hey, you need to rest.

But of course, they go to do that and they experience what any of you parents who think you're going to get a lie in experience. Dashed hopes. The kids leap on your bed and the crowd gets there before them. And Jesus get out of the boat, sees this inconvenient crowd, and it's his reaction that tells you why this event is so crucial.

Verse 34, 'When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, *because they were like sheep without a shepherd*.' And you could read that as Jesus caring for the people as a shepherd does his sheep. Which he does. Except, Mark's quoting the Old Testament. And standing on the threshold of the Promised Land, God tells Moses that Moses won't be leading the people in, that he's going to be taken from them. But Moses realises that's going to leave a leadership vacuum, so he prays to God that he would raise up a new leader: Numbers 27:17, 'Who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, *that the congregation of the Lord may not be as sheep that have no shepherd.*' And in response to that prayer, God raises up Joshua as leader, and then David, the shepherd boy, as king. But that image of the flock with no shepherd becomes a repeated metaphor in the Old Testament for absent leadership.

And yet, this crowd in Jesus' day didn't lack for leaders did they? What comes immediately before this is King Herod's birthday banquet, v21, 'For his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee.' So they've got civil and military and religious leaders coming out of their ears. They have loads of leaders.

But it's self-serving leadership, isn't it? Civil leaders who ruled for their pockets. Religious leaders who lead for their self-righteousness. Leadership exemplified by Herod's self-indulgent banquet that ends in the murder of John the Baptist, because Herod cared more about his image than justice.

You see, in the Old Testament, the metaphor of sheep without a shepherd wasn't just about absent but weak, ineffective and self-indulgent leadership. And it culminates in Ezekiel 34, when the Lord says to the leaders of the day, 'The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. *So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd*.' (v4-5). But in response God says, 'so I will come and be their shepherd. I'll seek them, I'll rescue them, I'll bind them up. I'll strengthen and feed them.'

And so when Jesus steps onto the beach, and sees this crowd as sheep without a shepherd, Mark's telling us, he's the new Moses come to lead his people out of slavery, he's the new Joshua, come to lead them into the Promised Land, he's the new David, to rule over them with justice. He's the ultimate shepherd king.

But of course, it's not just this crowd who face a crisis of leadership, is it? We also don't lack for leaders - whether that's in politics, or social influencers, or the church. There's no lack of people who want to shape our lives. And we look to leaders for direction and inspiration as well as for protection or deliverance. And yet, just as with Herod, that leadership can be tainted by self-interest. And a nation, or a church, or the followers of a social influencer, can be used to feed a leader's desire for money, or power, or just to look good.

But Mark is telling us, a very different leader has come. A king unlike any other. And in all our looking for direction and inspiration, or to be protected, or delivered, and in all our disappointments when leaders let us down, what we've really been looking for is him.

And instead of using this crowd, Mark tells us that Jesus has compassion on them.

But notice how that compassion shows itself, v34, 'He had compassion on them… and he began to teach them.' So, he feeds them, but he first feeds their hearts and minds. Because when you've lived under self-serving leadership, when you've been fed a diet of 'follow me and pursue power, or success, or beauty because that's how you'll thrive,' then what you really need is truth - the truth that opens your eyes, and changes your heart. That enables you to see and love what's truly valuable.

The Power of the King

And it's getting late, so the disciples come to Jesus and tell him, v36, "Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." In other words, 'Jesus, we're in the middle of nowhere, the shops are shutting, and you need to be wrapping this up.'

And v37, ‘But he answered them, *“You give them something to eat.”*’ They’re stood before 5000 men, which means anywhere up to 10,000 people might be present. And he tells them - ‘You do it. You feed them.’

If that was you, how would you have responded?

Probably the way they responded. Verse 37, “Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?” And you might earn one denarii a day. So this would require two thirds of a year’s salary. ‘Er, Jesus, I think you just need to send them away. They need to look elsewhere’

But Jesus doesn’t. Instead he asks the disciples, v38, “How many loaves do you have?” And the extent of their resources to meet this need is 5 loaves and 2 fish. They’re standing in front of this sea of human need and what do they have to offer? Next to nothing.

Now, maybe you see the need in your neighbours’, or your family’s lives. Maybe you see the need in wider society. Spiritual, physical and emotional needs, and that need weighs on you. You feel it. But like these disciples you feel totally impotent to do anything about it, because you are. And yet Jesus is standing there, saying to you, ‘you give them something to eat.’

But what they have is totally inadequate! So, just like Moses arranged Israel into groups in the wilderness, Jesus arranges this crowd in this desolate place. And, v41, ‘Taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all. *And they all ate and were satisfied*.’

Two banquets: Herod’s banquet and Jesus’ banquet. At one it’s all about image, and appearance, and power and status, and it ends in murder because it’s the banquet of death. But at this king’s banquet a multitude, some of whom may not have known what it was like to feel full in years, go home satisfied: ‘I cannot eat another crumb’. Because there’s a satisfaction, there’s a fullness, that money and power and image and being in with the right crew can never give you. But Jesus can. Because his is the banquet of life.

And Jesus does what these disciples and you and I could never do. He feeds them. And Mark tells us he took the bread and said a blessing, it’s probably the blessing any Jewish father would say, standing at the head of the table before all the eating and the fun begins: ‘Praise be to you, O Lord our God, king of the world, who makes bread to come forth from the earth, and who provides for all that you have created.’ And as Moses fed the people with manna in the wilderness, so Jesus feeds them with bread.

Except Moses didn’t give them the manna, God did. So Jesus isn’t just filling Moses’ shoes, he’s standing in the place of God. And he does something no human being can do. But he does it. But look how he does it. He takes what they have and he multiplies it. And he doesn’t bypass them when he gives it out, v41, he ‘gave them to the disciples to set before the people.’

You see, if these men, or you and I, think we’re the answer to anyone’s problem, we’re either going to end up deluded, thinking more highly of ourselves that we should, or in despair - when we realise our resources are so limited. But Jesus is an expert in taking what little we have - the gifts God has

placed in our hands - and multiplying them. Because God is always taking the small, and insignificant - the barren woman, the unloved wife, the left-handed man, the overlooked son, and using them to bless the world.

So, if you feel totally insufficient for the task God has given you, you are! But Jesus isn't. So give him what you have and let him use you to meet the needs around you.

And having been part of that, what do you think these disciples might have been feeling? We don't know, do we, because in part it's almost as if Jesus doesn't give them time to feel: v45, '*Immediately* he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side.' But that journey doesn't go so well, does it? They're already in need of a rest, but what they get is a night where it must have felt like the elements themselves were conspiring against them. And Jesus sees them in the early light of dawn - which tells you how little progress they'd made, v48, 'And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them.'

And like them, you can know what it's like to feel overstretched and in need of a rest. Or to feel impotent in the face of the needs of others. But you probably also know what it's like to be in that boat. You're trying to do the right thing; maybe, if you're a Christian, you're trying to living in obedience to Christ, like them you're trying to do what he's told you to do, but it's just not working. Worse than that, it feels like everything's against you, and you're making zero headway.

Well, Jesus sees you, just like he sees them. But he does more than see you. He comes to you.

Verse 48, 'And about the fourth watch of the night [that's somewhere between 3 and 6 in the morning] he came to them, walking on the sea.'

Now, you know those TV programmes, where some daredevil or stunt man tries to pull off some trick, or some daring stunt, and the presenters say, 'don't try this at home boys and girls.' Well, I can almost bet you've tried this one. I don't think a youth group summer pool party would be complete without someone trying to walk on water.

But the result's always the same, isn't it. And if death is the ultimate statistic and one out of one die, so is walking on water: one out of one sink. Which is why liberal theologians say, 'well, of course, this can't have happened. He was walking on a sand bar, or this was an optical illusion and he was actually walking along the shore.' Or maybe you're sat there thinking, 'yup, or it probably didn't happen at all.'

But if that's what you're thinking, then like the disciples, the message of the feeding of the 5000 hasn't penetrated your heart. Like them you haven't understood, v52, 'about the loaves'. Because who can do that but God alone?

You see, in the Old Testament, Job was a man who, just like these disciples, knew all about the circumstances of life conspiring against him - even though he'd sought to live a life of faithfulness to God. And in Job 9, Job says of God, 'He alone stretches out the heavens *and treads on the waves of the sea*.' Because who can walk on water? Only he who can feed a multitude in a wilderness.

But look at these disciples struggling in the wind, and Jesus comes to them and v48, 'He meant to pass them by.' Does Jesus intend to leave them struggling? 'See you on the other side, boys, you're

on your own for this one.' No. In the Old Testament there are two great moments when first Moses, and then Elijah, have extraordinary encounters with God. In Exodus 33, Moses asks God to show him his glory, and the Lord says, "I will make all my goodness *pass before you* and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD'" (Ex 33:19). And when God met with Elijah on Mount Horeb we're told, 'And behold, the LORD *passed by*.' (1 Kings 19:11). And on both occasions the LORD is God's covenant name, YHWH - I Am who I Am.

So this isn't Jesus abandoning them to their fate, leaving them to struggle in their own strength. This is God in all his goodness, passing before them as he passed before Moses and Elijah, this is God proclaiming his name before them. And how does he do it? In the man Jesus of Nazareth.

It's why, v50, 'He spoke to them and said, "Take heart; it is I -[in Greek, *ego eimi* - I AM]. Do not be afraid."' And he gets into the boat and v51, 'the wind ceased.'

So, when is it that Jesus reveals to them who he is? In the midst of a storm, when the wind's against them, when they're discovering, yet again, their weakness and frailty. And so often it's the same with us: it's in trials and difficulties, when maybe we're learning unflattering things about ourselves that we learn great things about God. And so sometimes, when we are praying, God, please stop the wind, we should rather be praying, God, teach me more about Jesus in this storm. Show me more of him. Because it's only in him that we'll hear those words, 'take heart; it is I; do not be afraid.'

But of course, these guys didn't get it, did they? And Mark tells us why, v52, 'their hearts were hardened.' And so often, when we're experiencing fear or frustration because of our circumstances, the problem isn't the circumstances as much as our hearts. We're not seeing Jesus as he really is.

So what can soften hard hearts?

The Humility of the King

Now, if you know Mark's gospel you'll know the word 'immediately' is one of Mark's favourites. And yet, despite Mark using it so often, in the context of Jesus having just fed thousands of people its use in v45 is striking: '*Immediately* he made his disciples get in a boat' and leave. He gives them no chance to savour the moment. And then, having dismissed the crowd himself, Jesus spends the whole night in prayer.

Why the urgency to get the disciples out of there as quickly as possible? And why spend a whole night in prayer? Well, in his account John tells us why. It's that, having been fed by Jesus, the people 'were about to come and take him by force to make him king.' In other words, revolution and revolt are in the air.

But Jesus hasn't come to be another Herod. He hasn't come to take power and use force. He's come to give up his life to save ours. And here he breaks bread and passes it to the disciples to feed the crowd, but another evening will come when he will break bread again and pass it to these same men, except this time he will say 'this is my body broken for you.'

And another night will come. And in the dark of the night on the lake, these disciples are struggling and sweating trying to make headway against the wind. But in night of the garden of Gethsemane

Christ faced the greatest struggle of all, as the storm of hell bore down upon him. And in that struggle he sweat drops of blood.

And at his trial the soldiers clothed him in purple, crowned him with thorns, gave him a reed for a sceptre, and mocked him, before nailing him to a cross with 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews' nailed above his head.

Why? Because that's who this king is: the king who gives his life for his people. The king whose body is broken to feed us, the king who endures the storm of God's wrath against sin, to bring us safely to shore. And as he does it all so that one day we might sit down with him at the greatest banquet table of all.

You see, if God has a habit of taking the seemingly weak and hopelessly inadequate, like barren and unloved women, and overlooked sons, and five loaves and two fish, and using them to bless others, then no-where is that clearer than the seeming weakness and defeat of the cross, where the saving power of God is poured out.

But the cross doesn't just show us Jesus' power, it shows us his character. You see, here it's when the disciples are tested with a crowd too large to feed and a wind too strong to master, that they see something of who Jesus really is. But it's in *his* greatest test, it's in his greatest trial, when not just a crowd, but the whole world is against *him*, when the storm of sin is bearing down on him, that we see him as he *really* is. It's as we see him giving up everything for us, who can give him nothing, and who deserve nothing, that we see his love and his grace and his mercy and it's beautiful.

It's what the thief crucified next to him saw. It's what the centurion stood at his feet saw. And when you see it, when you see the one who can feed a multitude, and the one who can tread upon the waves, dying in your place, that's what can melt your heart. And as it does, you'll trust him. You'll trust him when all the odds seem against you. You'll trust him when you're in the storm. You'll trust him that even though you are unable he is more than able. Able to take what little you have, and multiply it, and use it to bless and do good to those he's put around you.