

JESUS SATISFIES

Mark 8:1-13

Well this story sounds a lot like the account of the feeding of the five thousand recorded in chapter 6 of Marks Gospel – which we skipped over in this sermon series on Mark – and indeed some commentators have supposed that because of the similarities there was really only one feeding event. I totally reject that idea, because in Mark 8:19-20 Jesus' words make it absolutely clear that there were two separate events. Mark clearly understood and explains that there were two entirely separate occasions on which Jesus fed a multitude.

So as we study the events from our gospel reading together, you can find the main passage on page [***] of the church bibles and all the scripture I'm going to refer to will be projected on the screen.

Let's begin our study of this passage by looking at verses 1-3: “During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance.”” (verses 1-3)

The opening words "during those days" make it clear that the events of our reading are linked with Jesus' time in the Decapolis (Mark 7:31-37). The Decapolis – which is Greek for ten cities – was a federation of ten cities with a Greek character in Northeastern Palestine occupying the whole region of Bashan and Gilead. Mark doesn't specifically say that this event took place in Greek or Gentile territory, but the opening words do seem to locate it in Gentile territory on the East side of the sea of Galilee, so the crowd was very likely a mainly Gentile assembly. Indeed I think that's probably why Mark included both the account of Jesus feeding the five thousand, who were mostly or entirely Jews, and this feeding of four thousand, who were probably largely Gentiles.

In describing the crowd Mark uses a rare and intensified form of the word translated 'been with me' by the NIV - *prosmenein*, which implies a special adherence and commitment to Jesus. The crowd has not just been coincidentally present but intentionally *with* him and for the long period of three days. This is an unusually positive description of a crowd in Mark and the 'three days' implies a long and extensive teaching ministry. If I'm correct in thinking that this was largely a Gentile crowd, then Jesus finds a reception among Gentiles that he has not found among Jews. We're being prepared for the fact that Jesus is not just for the Jewish nation but for all mankind.

In the story of the feeding of the five thousand the disciples raise the issue of a need to feed the people, here Jesus raises this issue himself and says that he has compassion on the people because they have nothing to eat. In fact the Greek used here implies that Jesus has really deep emotions about the crowd and their plight. Mark says that Jesus 'called his disciples to him' – a phrase that Mark often uses when Jesus is about to intervene. The detail Mark adds that 'some of them have come a long distance' fits well with the austere and rugged geography of the Decapolis region, which had fewer towns and settlements than did the western Galilean side of the lake. Certainly it was no place to be without provisions; as Jesus says, in this condition 'they will collapse on the way.'

Let's move on to look at verse 4:

“His disciples answered, "But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?"” (verse 4)

The apparent perplexity of the disciples here is one of the main reasons that some commentators believe that this event is just another description of the earlier feeding of the five thousand, but I don't think this really presents us with any difficulty. Firstly, it was probably some months after the feeding of the five thousand that these events took place and secondly, the disciples were probably reluctant to presume that Jesus would again perform a miraculous multiplication of the available food as he had done on just one single earlier occasion. Thirsting after miracles was a sign of Jesus' opponents not his disciples as we shall see when we look at verses 11-13. The

translation of this verse 4 is going to be important for us in a moment and we need to note that the disciples statement could be better translated: "For *who* is able in this remote region to *satisfy* [Greek *chortazein*] these [people] with bread?"

Let's continue with verses 5-8:

“"How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked. "Seven," they replied. He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people, and they did so. They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them. The people ate and were satisfied. Afterwards the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.” (verses 5-8)

Perhaps the number of loaves available – seven – is symbolic, but I don't really think so. Mark is rarely given to using symbolic descriptions and meanings. Unlike the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus personally seats the crowd rather than having the disciples do so.

Assuming that the crowd was largely Gentiles, the blessing of God's name before the distribution of the bread would have been a novel action for many of them. This may explain the rather unusual pronouncement of thanksgiving over fish in verse 7. The pronouncement of blessing over bread was the normal Jewish practice for beginning a meal, but the blessing of God's Name prior to the distribution of the fish was not normal practice and seems to have been intended to teach the people to thank God for their daily food. The offering of praise and thanksgiving acknowledges that the multiplied food is the gracious provision of God.

Verse 8 tell us that this gracious provision of God through the person of Jesus '*satsified*' [Greek *chortazein*] the people. That brings us back to verse 4 where the same Greek word *chortazein* is used and you'll remember I said it could have better been translated '*satisfy*'. So in verse 4 the disciples asked how the people could be satisfied and in verse 8 we have our answer – Jesus can satisfy them. And he can still

satisfy us today. Indeed Jesus is the only person or thing which can ever completely satisfy us – and he *will* satisfy us if we just turn to him in faith. Turn to Christ in faith and receive the bread of life which satisfies our souls.

Let's conclude the feeding story with verses 9 and 10:

“About four thousand men were present. And having sent them away, he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the region of Dalmanutha.” (verses 9-10)

The NIV says that about four thousand 'men' were in the crowd, but actually the Greek doesn't really imply that this was just a count of the men in the crowd – unlike the Greek used in describing the feeding of the five thousand in Mark chapter six where the implication is that there were five thousand men in the crowd, plus no doubt women and children. So the crowd we've been reading about today was probably much smaller than the crowd which Jesus had miraculously fed on an earlier occasion – but that in no way detracts from the miraculous nature of Jesus' provision for them.

From the early church fathers onward the church has rightly perceived that in the feeding of the four thousand Jesus brings saving bread to the Gentiles, as he brought it earlier to the Jews in the feeding of the five thousand. The journey to the Gentiles, starting in chapter 7 that we talked about earlier, shows us that the Gentiles are not beyond the reach of salvation and that they are more receptive to it than the Jews. Like the book of Jonah, this story reveals that supposed Gentile outsiders are in fact surprisingly receptive to the word of God in Jesus.

The journey of Jesus to Tyre, Sidon, and the Decapolis proves that, although the Gentiles are ostracized by the Jews, they are not ostracized by God. Jewish abuse and insults against the Gentiles does not reflect God's attitude towards the Gentiles. There is a lesson here for the people of God in every age, that their enemies are neither forsaken by God nor beyond the compassion of Jesus. On the contrary, the Gentiles, like others “a long distance” away, are the objects of Jesus' compassion. The difference between the Jews'

response to the Gentiles and Jesus' response can be seen in Mark's concluding phrase, "And [Jesus] sent them away." The Greek word for "send away," *apolyein*, can mean either "to dismiss", to "get rid of"; *or* "to release", to "liberate." The first, get rid of, is the Jewish response; the second, to liberate, is Jesus' response. Jesus satisfies the hungry outcasts and liberates them.

Let's look at the final three verses of our reading; 11-13:

"The Pharisees came and began to question Jesus. To test him, they asked him for a sign from heaven. He sighed deeply and said, "Why does this generation ask for a miraculous sign? I tell you the truth, no sign will be given to it." Then he left them, got back into the boat and crossed to the other side." (verses 11-13)

This little encounter is so significant that the Pharisees' demand for a sign from Jesus is recorded in all four gospels. The Greek of verse 11 is actually quite antagonistic towards Jesus, leaving no doubt of the Pharisees opposition to him. They're not trying to test him in any fair or objective sense, they're trying to discredit him.

Behind the demand for a sign was the prior, firm conviction that Jesus' authority was demonic in origin, his works an expression of black magic (see Mark 3:22). The Pharisaic expectation of "a sign from heaven" is echoed by Paul's statement that: "Jews demand miraculous signs" (1 Corinthians 1:22). In Jewish thought, true prophecy was corroborated by the fulfilment of what a prophet predicted (Deuteronomy 18:22). A Jewish commentary on Deuteronomy 18 runs: "If a prophet begins to prophesy, listen to him if he does a sign and miracle; but if he does not do them, do not hear him."

The sign requested by the Pharisees is not simply a request for a miracle, because in the Synoptic Gospels a "sign" is not a miracle, nor is a miracle called a sign. Only John's gospel refers to miracles as signs. Moreover, Jesus has already done many miracles which the Pharisees must have known about. The word Mark normally uses for "miracle" (Greek *dynamis*) is absent here. Rather, the Pharisees request "a sign (Greek *sēmeion*) from heaven," that is, a confirmation

of Jesus' ministry from God himself, an "outward compelling proof of divine authority." They reason that if Jesus is working in God's name, then God should divinely authorize his work.

In verse 12 Jesus groaned in his spirit (again the Greek is stronger than the NIV translation) and says there will be no sign. He categorically denies the Pharisees request. Israel's disobedience in the wilderness in Moses' day (Deuteronomy 32:5-20) has been carried down to Jesus' day. Jesus isn't denying the Pharisees a sign because of the Messianic secret, he's performed plenty of miracles in public, rather it's because of their wilful disbelief. In the Synoptic Gospels the demand for "signs" is itself a sign of attempting to gain by empirical means what can only be gained by faith and trust. It is the false prophet who seeks to deceive by signs and wonders (Mark 13:22). Jesus forsakes signs, because: "to force the evidence upon his audience would make a faith response by its very nature impossible." Faith that depends on proof is not faith, but only veiled doubt.

I love my wife, but I can't prove it to you here and now today. Love can't easily be empirically proven. Faith also, just like love, cannot easily be proven; it can only be demonstrated over time by trust and active commitment. Let's demonstrate our faith in Christ by our commitment and obedience to Him. At the end of our story, the Pharisees turn and walk away; but the disciples follow Jesus into the boat. Eduard Schweizer draws an insightful conclusion from this closing description, he says: "faith comes when one steps into the boat with Jesus and does not prefer to remain in safety on the shore."

So what about you, have you demonstrated your faith by stepping into the boat with Jesus. Have you committed yourself to him in faith and trust. Let's all climb aboard and embark on a voyage with our Lord and Master that will take us not across the Sea of Galilee but across the ocean of the rest of our lives until Christ brings us safely to the far shore of the kingdom of heaven where we shall spend the rest of eternity in the place he has prepared for us. All aboard the Jesus boat whilst there's still time – don't get left behind.