

## **SERMON – SUNDAY 1 AUGUST 2021 - Ephesians 4.1-16, John 6.24-35**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last week we had the feeding of the 5,000 – loaves and fish galore, or should that be loaves and fishes galore? I hate to think how many times I've preached on that over the years, and I've often wondered what it must have been like to be part of such a large crowd, part of that group who were part of a miracle.

I've often wondered about miracles, and struggled with them – can Jesus really feed this many people, did he really do such an amazing thing? I can't prove he did, I simply have to accept that he could – if I believe he is the Son of God, then he is capable to a miracle. I am not going to lose sleep about it, I'm not going to submerge myself in doubt – and if someone else says "I really struggle with this miracle, I struggle to believe", I will accept your struggles and your doubts.

It's strange that, preaching on this passage in summer 2021, I don't find it's the miracle I struggle with – it's the crowd! We were up in Newcastle for a few days last week, and spent some time of the sea front at Whitley Bay. On a normal summer day I would expect crowds of people, and I'd be happy with it. It's all part of the experience – "I do like to be beside the seaside, I do like to be beside the sea, There are lots of girls beside, I would like to beside, the seaside". This time, it was more of a struggle – being relaxed when we were around people, even young ladies from Geordie land! The pandemic has changed my perspective, changed life for all of us.

The crowd of people who've listened to Jesus, who've been fed by Jesus, who've seen him at work – this is a crowd who don't want to lose him, people who are happy together. You'll remember last week that Jesus disappeared, and was found later that night walking across the Lake in the middle of a storm. OK, just another unexplained miracle we have to cope with.

The crowds want Jesus, and they will go and find him. I don't suppose all 5,000 people got into boats to look – but quite a few did. Eventually they found him – "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Rabbi, teacher – we want you, why are you here, when did you come here?

Jesus almost sounds a bit grumpy "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 not my teaching you want, it's not because you saw signs, you're here for the food. I can cope with this human side of Jesus – a bit of honesty. (His reaction makes me feel a bit less guilty for muttering to myself about the way people

only want me on their terms). No doubt the people following Jesus had good excuses too for when they were too busy to follow him.

Do you think some of the crowd denied it – but Lord we were listening – or did some of them look at each other, just a bit guilty - after all, the bread and the fish had been the highlight of the weekend, and they were interested because there might be more free food.

Jesus recognises people's humanity, people's ordinary impulses – after all, he is human himself, he does understand. But he challenges them, challenges us to go further.

“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.”

For us, food is rarely something to be worked for. But remember the sheer effort our grandmothers put into feeding the family – hours of work every day. For us food rarely perishes – we have a fridge, a freezer. If it goes off, we can probably afford to chuck it away and buy more.

Jesus' listeners were different – they knew the effort, the facts, the hunger. Can you imagine what Jesus' audience would say if we took them into Morrisons or Sainsbury's and they saw the huge variety of bread on sale? It is actually somewhat mind-blowing – you could almost describe it as miraculous!

Jesus had met their needs – and he offered them more. Some of them just took what they needed now – and can you blame them? We give to the food bank this weekend, and the Hope Centre is just one of hundreds of churches across this country of ours that makes food available to those who would otherwise go hungry. Some who come for food will be grateful, some will wonder why a church is doing this, some will stay and find out more. Some will find a faith which transforms their lives. Many will not, and if I was desperate, if I was hungry, if I was despairing, if I was angry – I'm not sure I'd want to believe in a God of love. Too many people in our Society are so ground down that they will not believe anything can make life better.

Others did ask Jesus “What must we do to perform the works of God?” They do see him as God's messenger – I like the image that on him God the Father has set his seal. When I baptise, I seal a child with the sign of the cross – I always say to parents that we have a lot of words in the baptism service, here is an opportunity for an action, an action that needs no words – God's seal.

What must we do? Believe – it is as simple as that. Not just believing in God – God, some vague sort of power – believing in the one whom he has sent. For the people in the crowd, those who had eaten the loaves and the fish – they had to decide whether this miracle worker is of God, they have to believe in him. They want a sign, Jesus reminds them of one of the great stories of their faith – when God fed the Children of Israel with manna while they were in the wilderness. You must believe that God is with you, just as God was with them.

Yes, we want God's bread – we want God, though we're not too sure what that means. "Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'"

Yes, but what does that mean? Paul writes to the Ephesians, and he couples the belief in Christ, with our calling by Christ. "I ... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called" – I beg you, because this matters, for you, for me, for the world around us. "Live with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Look around you, look at our society and our community, look what happens when we don't maintain unity in the bond of peace.

God's love is everywhere, Christ is everywhere – ascended, descended – there is no situation, no individual, that cannot be touched by the love of God. And God gives us all gifts – all of us are here to equip the saints for the work of ministry. We have a job to do in church, sometimes that seems overwhelming. Lots of people still want us, but fewer seem willing to be involved. I struggle, and I know I'm not alone – so often it seems growing churches demand more time and energy than I, or we, can ever manage to put in. I do believe that we all have jobs to do in the world, I do believe our work as Christians Monday to Saturday is just as important as our Christianity on Sunday. I also believe that we work in God's strength, and God's love – and if we really believe in that "I am the bread of life", the best thing we can do, is to kneel, accept that bread, and know that Christ is with us, in us. Thanks be to God.