

28 July 2024

JESUS FEEDS THE 4,000

1. INTRO

- A. Have you ever experienced a moment where you were *sure* that you've been in this situation before? That the events around you seem so familiar that you might be able to almost narrate what's going on?
- B. The French have a term for this feeling. They call it *déjà vu*, which literally translates to 'already seen'. It's a different moment, but you feel like it's already happened, and you know what's going on. Has anybody here experienced this? Apparently some two thirds of the human population will at some point in their lives.
- C. Now, some of you will be glad to know that I'm not going to talk about psychology this morning...but I am going to highlight something that we should be aware of: *biblical déjà vu*. In case you're wondering, it's a term I made up, but I think it works. Let's call *biblical déjà vu* the experience of encountering a passage of the Bible that seems almost identical to something we've seen before. It's the feeling you get when you read a passage and think 'Oh, this is like that other story, let me skip ahead to something new'.
 - i. But, if we believe that the Bible is given to us from God, that it's true, and that it contains eternally important guidance and instruction for us, then we need to study and reflect on *all* of it. Further, if we see such similar events happening, it should cause us to stop and figure out why both are there.
 1. *At this point, I'd like to invite David to come up and read the passage for us, and you might think to yourself—we've seen this before. But just listen closely.*

Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down. ³⁰Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. ³¹The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel.

³²Jesus 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. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way."

³³His disciples answered, "Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?"

³⁴"How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked.
"Seven," they replied, "and a few small fish."

³⁵ He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. ³⁶ Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people. ³⁷ They all ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. ³⁸ The number of those who ate was four thousand men, besides women and children. ³⁹ After Jesus had sent the crowd away, he got into the boat and went to the vicinity of Magadan.

- D. So, there's a sense in which we've seen almost all of this before. Jesus leading people up a mountain, healings, a miraculous multiplication of food. We've been there, done that, right?
- i. Actually, there are more similarities between the feeding of the 4,000 and the 5,000 than you might have even clocked! I found a little list of all the ways that the two miraculous feedings are similar, and it's pretty striking.
 - ii. But, to circle back to *biblical déjà vu*, we need to be really careful that we don't just zone out when we encounter similar stories, we need to pay close attention to what is *different* here. And the most important difference is where the story takes place.

2. WHERE ARE JESUS AND THE DISCIPLES?

- A. The passage David just read for us tells us that Jesus has moved. Last week, Luke mentioned that Jesus and his followers were in the region of Tyre and Sidon when they encountered the Canaanite woman. This gives us a rough idea of where they may have been, north-west of Jerusalem and outside the areas where the Jewish people lived. But now Jesus has moved, where to?
- i. Well, we know that they end up on a mountain. Not the most clear designation from Matthew, but Mark gives us an additional hint. Mark 7:31 says that Jesus was in the region of the Decapolis. This wasn't a city, but an area comprised of different cities of varying size, a bit like we might talk about the central belt of Scotland.
 - ii. But what's most significant about the Decapolis is *who* lived there—namely, Gentiles.

3. WHO ARE THE 4,000?

- A. 'Gentile' is one of those words that appears so often in the Bible and so often in talks from it that we can almost take for granted that people know what it means. But it's worth asking—who are these folks living in the Decapolis?
- i. Essentially, these are cities that were conquered and colonised by the Greeks in the last few centuries before Jesus. Alexander the Great and his successors blazed a trail from Greece all the way to modern-day India, and along the way they took over cities and land that would help to supply their military campaign with both food and materials.

- ii. The Romans would end up doing the same, so after a few centuries of this, the local ways of life would have been pushed to the margins and people from all around the Greco-Roman world settled there, bringing their own cultures and religions with them.
 - iii. So, these weren't just Gentiles in the sense that they were non-Jews, they were people whose ancestors were connected with colonisation and oppression, and as you might imagine, the Jewish people wouldn't have been keen to be seen with them, much less spend time in their company.
- B. And yet, that's exactly what Jesus does. We saw last week how he miraculously drove an evil spirit from the daughter of a Canaanite woman. Luke was absolutely right, in this section of Matthew we can see the beginning of a trajectory that spans across the Bible and subsequent history—the idea that being part of the Kingdom of God is not tied to your ancestry or your particular citizenship, it's the result of faith in Jesus.

4. WHAT DOES JESUS DO?

- A. What does Jesus do? Miracles. Two miracles in the context of several days. We're told that a huge number of people followed him up the mountainside—and people brought their friends who were in need of healing. Notice the detail that Matthew shows us, he specifically mentions 'the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute, and many others.'
- i. This suggests a few things—1) Remember that this is ancient Palestine, there are no escalators or lifts, and the majority of people that Matthew has highlighted for us couldn't have gotten there without great difficulty, significant help from others, or quite likely both. 2) There is a slight difference between this and the previous miracle from last week. Last week Jesus delivered a young girl from an evil spirit, whereas in this passage he's not driving out demons but healing physical maladies.
 - ii. This might not seem particularly different to us, but remember that Matthew is writing a biographical account of Jesus particularly to people from a *Jewish* background. He makes some assumptions of his readers that occasionally need unpacking. For instance, the mention of the people healed in this passage should jog a memory to Jewish readers.
 1. *Isaiah 35:5-6 says that 'The eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue should for joy.'* N. T. Wright, a biblical scholar and former bishop, writes that *'This text...is part of a passage where God promises that the people of Israel will be brought back from exile, coming safely through the wilderness to arrive at their home. Matthew is underlining his belief that the long-awaited time is now at last coming to pass. The healings are not just signs of special, though peculiar, power. They are signs, three-dimensional signs if you like, of the fact that Jesus is fulfilling the old prophecies.'*
 - a. *But, time and time again, like we saw a few weeks ago, the Jewish leaders and theologians didn't see Jesus in this way, they*

saw him as a threat. People in Jesus' circles have already been murdered at this point, and there is an active plot to have Jesus killed as well.

- iii. So, while the theological elite of Israel had missed the signs about their promised deliverer, Matthew wants us to know that it's actually the Gentiles who are beginning to demonstrate faith and trust in Jesus. We saw that last time in a small context with the Canaanite woman, now we're seeing it happen on a grand scale. Look what Matthew writes: 'The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. **And they praised the God of Israel.**'
 - 1. *That last part is really important. The response of those who were healed was praise to the God of Israel. We can imagine people who couldn't previously move their bodies lifting their hands to God, people who were previously mute singing to God in worship.*
 - 2. *The Gentiles' response to Jesus' healing in their lives was worship. They don't go skipping down the mountainside, or off to an IMAX movie to make the best use of their new sight or hearing, they stick to Jesus like glue. They want to get to know him, to learn from him, and to follow him...to the extent that they run out of food!*
- B. And this brings us to the second miracle. Look what Jesus says in verse 32: 'I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way.'
 - i. I don't know about you, but I'm a bit of a 'worst-case scenario' guy. I always have a spare bottle of water kicking about the car in case I get stuck somewhere. But I never have as much as three day's worth of supplies with me, and yet we see in the passage that these folks clearly don't want to leave Jesus, even to feed themselves. This is how enthralled they were with him.
 - ii. Part of this seems to be geographical. The disciples say 'Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?'
 - 1. *A few things come to mind here...First, this does indicate that they are in a remote enough region that popping out to the Gregg's downstairs isn't an option. The people are sufficiently hungry that they couldn't survive the journey to go get more food.*
 - 2. *But more to the point, this is one of those moments where the disciples really seem to sound a bit like idiots. 'Where could we get enough food...how can we feed this multitude of hungry people?' Think about it: they were among a very exclusive group who had actually witnessed a large number of people being fed by Jesus, from nothing but the lunch of a small child. You would kind of think that they might have some idea of what's coming...
 - a. *And maybe that's what they're thinking. This might be a 'last time we said this Jesus made tons of food for everybody, so let's try it again' kind of statement. Or maybe they're still in some**

degree of doubt over who Jesus is. Either way, I think Matthew is leaving us to make up our own minds. What is clear is that there was a massive crowd of hungry people and just a few scraps of food left.

3. *Jesus takes the offered loaves and fish, gives thanks to God for them, and keeps passing more and more food to the disciples, who in turn distribute them to the crowd.*
- iii. It's worth a brief aside to mention that there are some sceptics who have tried to argue against the miraculous feedings in the Gospels, and the argument usually goes something like this: 'Of course Jesus didn't have the power to actually create food from thin air, what *really* happened was that when the people in the crowd saw the generosity of those who had donated all of their lunch, they all eventually pitched in as well, and it turns out that once everyone stopped hoarding there was enough for everyone.'
 1. *This is a fairly common interpretation of these passages, but I think it ignores a few points: First, do we really believe that if people had food reserves in such magnitude that they would a) have several days' worth of food, and b) enough leftovers to share with others?*
 2. *Second, that both Matthew and Mark include not one but TWO accounts of miraculous multiplications of food should catch our attention. We're **supposed** to feel a bit of déjà vu here. David Turner helpfully observes 'If this miracle is understood as occurring in Gentile territory, Matthew's purpose in including a second miracle meal story is evidently to demonstrate Jesus' concern for the Gentiles and to underline the theme of Gentile world mission, with which this Gospel concludes.' And this brings us to our last questions...*

5. WHY TWO MASS FEEDINGS? WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

- A. The quote from Turner raises a really important point—this isn't just more healing from Jesus for the sake of healing, or feeding for the sake of having a nice meal. In addition to demonstrating Jesus' power and his fulfilment of the prophecies about the Messiah, **in the second miracle in particular Matthew is showing his readers that a healing, transformative relationship with God isn't restricted to the people of Israel.**
 - i. Now, to be fair, it's never been *ethnically* tied to the people of Israel, there's not an 'Israelite DNA' factor. We have examples of outsiders being brought into the people of God earlier in the Bible, including individuals like Ruth, who not only finds hope in God's people but is herself one of Jesus' ancestors.
 - ii. But what we see here is people from *outside* the Jewish tradition worshipping the God of the Israelites, in response to Jesus' work and teaching. If you remember the talk from a few weeks ago, Jesus is continuing to dismantle the barriers of religiosity that had been put up by

the likes of the Pharisees. A restored relationship with God isn't something that you inherit genealogically. It's not being part of a particular nation. In our terms, it's not simply having Christian parents and turning up to church each week.

- B. The doors to the Kingdom of God were, if you will, cracked open in the previous passage for the Canaanite woman on the basis of her faith, which was acknowledged and celebrated by Jesus. But in this passage, the doors to the Kingdom are opened wider. Jesus is demonstrating that the Gentiles are welcome. This is all part of a trajectory on Matthew's part, the Gospel will actually end with Jesus' final instruction being to share the truth about his life, death and resurrection to the ends of the earth.
- C. But there's also another image that we might miss—what Jesus does with bread in Matthew's Gospel in general. If you've been here over the past month or so, you may have noticed that bread comes up surprisingly often in this part of Matthew's gospel. Let's zoom back slightly and see the trajectory.
 - i. It starts back in chapter 14, with the feeding of the 5,000 coming from five loaves of bread. Later on in chapter 15, when the Pharisees are up in arms because Jesus' disciples don't purify themselves before they eat, in the original Greek text it actually says 'they don't purify themselves before they eat bread'. Last week we heard about the conversation between Jesus and the Canaanite woman, and a bit part of it revolves around the idea of bread and crumbs. And then we have today's passage, where Jesus again feeds people miraculously using bread as a key ingredient.
 - ii. Why this emphasis? Is Matthew a fan of the Bake Off? Was he hungry when he was writing these chapters? I think there's something bigger at work. If we keep zooming back, Matthew 26 comes into view, and this takes place in the final days of Jesus' time with the disciples. They celebrate the Passover meal together, in a moment that we call the Last Supper.
 1. *The Passover was the time the Jewish people set aside to remember when they were saved from the death of their firstborn children in Egypt. They had to kill a lamb, and spread its blood across their doorframes. In doing so, they were literally and spiritually covered by the blood of this lamb, which had died in the place of their firstborn. As part of the celebration, they would eat bread and lamb meat, and drink wine in memory of God saving his people. But what does Jesus do with this?*
 2. *Matthew 26 says 'When they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat, this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is the blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."*
 3. *I think that this is where Matthew's bread imagery leads. Jesus isn't saying he's literally a loaf of bread, he's saying that he's going to be*

broken like this bread. He's saying that his blood is going to run down his body and into the ground like wine poured from a bottle.

4. *And not long after this meal, Jesus was arrested, tortured, convicted, and executed. His body was broken, his blood poured out. But unlike the Passover, Jesus' death would be sufficient to save all. Not just the children of Israel, but people from every nation. And if your hope is in Jesus, if you believe and trust that he was the Son of God and your saviour, who took the punishment for your sin, you can be part of his family.*

- D. Following Jesus' death and resurrection, his followers regularly ate bread and drank wine together in celebration of Jesus' death on their behalf. The biblical authors sometimes wrote about this, and one set of verses in 1 Corinthians is particularly helpful for us this morning. The apostle Paul writes 'Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.'
- i. So, celebrating communion isn't merely a way to reflect on Jesus' death. We reflect on Jesus' death in all sorts of ways, it's something more than that. First of all, it's a *family* event.
 1. *You may be fortunate, as I am, to be able to take communion with your family members, but I mean something more here. When Paul says that communion is a participation in the body of Christ, he's meaning that this is something that's a universal experience for the church. When we worship in this way, we stand alongside brothers and sisters in the underground church in China, in persecution in Nigeria, brothers and sisters who we've not met but who are genuinely our family in that we share the same saviour. So even if you don't have a physical family, you are still in a real and tangible way part of God's family, and you're also part of our church family.*
 - ii. Second, in communion we picture and practice what it is to depend on God, much like the people that Jesus fed in our passage this morning. Despite being healed and made whole again, they were hungry and they couldn't get to food on their own steam. Without Jesus, they would have been helpless. And *that* is how we come to the Lord's table. We don't dance up the aisle, bragging about our perfect devotional lives, or how we memorized the book of Jeremiah, or how much money we've donated to charity. **Coming to the Lord's table is a declaration of dependence.** This should be the moment of all moments where we recognize that we don't get here on our own steam, but solely because of Jesus' perfect life, saving death, and resurrection.
 - iii. Finally, the Lord's table should be a place where we are mindful of the overflowing mercy and provision of God. This might sound a little strange. It is, after all, a few centimetres of cut up bread. There's nothing special about the bread. There's nothing special about the wine. They're

symbols. But they're symbols of the boundless love and provision of a God whose storehouses never run empty.

1. *My uncle, who passed away recently, was an amazing cook, to be honest he excelled at hospitality full stop. You'd turn up at his house and he already knew what you liked to drink and had a glass ready for you. He would have been working for hours before getting food ready so that he could spend time with you when you came round. It was always a multi-course menu, cooked to perfection. My cousin James, who is also in ministry, reminded me of something that my uncle used to say when he invited you round to dinner. He'd always say to **come hungry**. To come hungry.*

2. *And I think that's exactly the posture that we should take as Christians when we come to the Lord's table. It's not that we need to beat ourselves up over our shortcomings, it's to acknowledge that actually we've got nothing to contribute except our hearts and our lives. And it's also an encouragement to be like the Gentiles on the mountain, transformed by Jesus' healing and also fully dependant on him.*

E. Let's pray. Dear Lord, in one story you demonstrate your love, your power, your healing, and your compassion. Thank you for your Son, that he emptied himself in order to come to earth as a man, that he knows what it's like to be human, that he lived the life of righteousness that we could not live and took on himself the punishment that we deserved. Thank you that because of this, we are in union with him and accordingly united to one another. May we live lives transformed by this reality, in Jesus' name. Amen

F. I've had a song in the back of my head as I prepared this talk, and I asked Ellyn and Jon if they would sing it as we prepare for sharing bread and wine together, and they kindly agreed.