



**Sermon: - 6th August 2017**

## **An Everyday Miracle**

*Isaiah 55: 1-5, Matthew 14: 13-21*

I wonder if you've noticed the recent adverts for Tesco and for Sainsbury's. I always wonder which of these adverts come first! Sainsbury's have an extra special range, Asda's is chosen by you, Tesco's is "finest". Always they try to outdo one another and where one goes the other will soon follow. Tesco's recent adverts are about food love stories; the tagline on their website is "Behind every meal we love is a story." Sainsbury's campaign centres around what they call, "food dancing" which they say is living well. However, what both adverts have in common is a recognition that food is more than fuel. Eating is not just about keeping our bodies going and replenishing lost energy. It's much more significant.

And food is significant in the Bible as well. Have you noticed how often biblical stories centred around food? From the apple in the garden of Eden to the last supper, food has been a focal point of God's relationship with humanity, and often it is a metaphor for his dealings with us. He gave the Israelites very strict rules about what they could and couldn't eat, not just on a whim, but so that they would stay healthy in a time in history and in a climate when food hygiene was unknown. When the Israelites were in the Desert he fed them quails and manna, symbols of his care for them even when they had turned their backs on him. Esau sold Jacob his birthright for a plate of soup.

In the 1950s, the psychologist, Abraham Maslow, spoke of a hierarchy of needs. He said that we need various things, but we don't notice the lack of something until our more basic needs are met. Our needs are, in the order we need them, in order of importance to us, firstly physical needs, food and shelter, followed by the need for safety, then the need for love and friendship, then the need for the respect of your peers, and only when all of these needs are met are we aware of a spiritual need. For Esau, his need for food was more urgent than any other need, especially, at that moment, some far-off need for recognition as the head of his tribe. We will return to Maslow's hierarchy of needs in a moment or two.

Continuing the biblical metaphor of food, the psalmist describes heaven as a banqueting table spread with a cornucopia of good things; it is a symbol of God's love. And in the New Testament Jesus shared meals with many people, often those on the margins of society and because of that was criticised for being a drunkard and a glutton! Food is a primary

need of humankind and so perhaps it's not surprising that God uses it to speak to us of our spiritual needs.

And so today we have another food story. And it could fit easily into either Tesco's or Sainsbury's advertising campaigns. Perhaps particularly Tesco's, "behind every meal we love is a story." Today's story is a good story, and we all love a good story, but it's also a deeply meaningful story. Food is significant, providing food is significant and sharing food with others is deeply significant.

The story begins with Jesus withdrawing to be on his own. This incident, feeding of the 5000, follows immediately in the Gospels on the death of John the Baptist. John, as we know, was Jesus' cousin. It would be hard for Jesus to hear that John had died, and even more so, how he had met his end. And so, he withdraws to a lonely place to grieve. Yet even in his grief the crowds will not leave him alone and they follow him into the Desert. He may have had enough of them, but they cannot get enough of him. Yet even in his own sorrow and grief, he had compassion upon them, he taught them and he healed them. Here was a teacher who had more than words to give them. Is it any wonder he was popular, and a danger to the religious authorities? It wasn't just that his ideas were revolutionary, he backed them up with action. He taught of love for enemies, and he loved his enemies. He taught of building the kingdom of God, and he reached out to those who had no hope and gave them hope. He taught of God's love for everyone, even the poor and the weak, and then demonstrated it in his healing touch. Is it any wonder that the crowds seized every opportunity to follow this man, this glimpse of hope, in the midst of their poor, difficult, and oppressed lives? In the presence of Jesus, they could see the hope of a better future. In the presence of Jesus, they could feel themselves loved and cared for, they could feel that they were given the consequence and status which they lacked in their daily lives, they could feel important, that they mattered. In the presence of Jesus, they could reach out and touch the hem of the garment of God.

And so, they follow him into the Desert, and listen to him while the afternoon wears away. And then it is late and they have no food.

Whatever happened that day, and no matter how interesting it might have been, the mechanics of a miracle are not as important as what this story says to us about God and his relationship with us. The whole incident is packed with many layers of tradition and story that go back deep in the history and custom of Israel.

In this story, with its central fact of the provision of God when people are in need, we are moved through the Exodus and the prophets, and the provision of food in the Desert, quails and manna. There are echoes of the psalms and of John the Baptist who preached renewal and repentance in the wilderness. As so often in the history of God's dealing with the Israelites there is grace and provision in the wilderness. It does not stop there, however, because there are echoes too of the eucharist, and the sharing of bread and wine and the abundance and generosity of the Lord's Supper. They broke bread together, and in the breaking of the bread found themselves united in fellowship and nourished both spiritually and physically.

The crowd were in the wilderness. They were in a literal Desert, but they were also in a spiritual Desert, they were in a needy place, needing sustenance for the body but also for the soul. It also is a picture of the hierarchy of needs of which we spoke earlier. The crowd would not hear the teachings of Jesus while they were hungry. Jesus attended to their physical needs, so that he could attend to their spiritual needs. This story, then, speaks of the generosity of God. There was no sense in which the crowd and deserved the attention of Jesus nor in which it had earned the bread on which it fed. This is a story of grace. God meets us at our point of need, and regardless of whether or not we deserve it, he fulfils our need.

The words of Isaiah could have been the words of Jesus that day, and they are still the words of Jesus to us today.

*"Come, all you who are thirsty, and you who have no money,*

*come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. 2 Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,*

*and you will delight in the richest of fare."*

However, there is another layer to the story. It is also a story of God's willingness to take whatever we offer, no matter how poor, no matter how small, and use it for his purposes.

"People are hungry," the disciples said. "You feed them," Jesus answers. "We have here only five loaves of bread, and two fish." And then Jesus says, "bring them to me!"

And I think this is the crux of the matter, in the hands of Jesus small things become great things. In the hands of Jesus our little efforts for the kingdom of God can achieve amazing ends. It doesn't matter how little we do. It doesn't matter how able we are, or how lacking in ability. It doesn't matter how much we have, or how little we have. Everything that we offer will be accepted by God and will be used by him in ways that will astound us, that will astonish us, and will achieve things that we could never imagine.

This story reminds me of the Acts of Random Kindness in which we are engaging as a congregation. They are such small things, the tea light at Christmas, the chocolate heart on Valentine's day, to name but two. I know from speaking to some of you who have been involved in that that you went out in fear and trembling. It's not very Scottish to go up to somebody on the street, who you don't know, and give them a gift. But I also know that many of you were surprised by the reception you got. The delight that people expressed in getting this tiny gift was completely out of proportion to the size of the gift. Such a small thing, done in the name of Jesus, bringing joy to the people of Lennoxton. Who knows what seeds we might have sown in that small act. But as the story today tells us, small things offered in faith can achieve unimaginable things for the kingdom of God. This is a story of provision at the point of need. It is a story of the compassion and the grace of God. But it is also a story to encourage us. For it is a story of riches out of poverty, of great things from small beginnings, and of the miracle that can happen when we give to God the smallest offering with a generous heart.