**Jesus makes a meal for many**

Text: Mark 6:30-44

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Exodus 16:1-8; Mark 6:30-44

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 65, 476, 184, 373, 530

**Series:** The gospel of Mark (#17)

**Theme:** Jesus leads his disciples to a quiet place to rest, but there they find a great crowd, upon whom Jesus has compassion so He teaches them. Much later in the day the disciples express concern about the need of the people for food in the desolate place where they were. With only five loaves and two fish, Jesus miraculously fed all the people, about five thousand men, and there were twelve baskets of leftovers after everyone had eaten their fill.

**Proposition:** Jesus provides what we need, as only God can.

**Introduction**

Have you ever heard a sermon about the ‘feeding of the five thousand’? Most of us have likely heard one or a few! I once listened to a recording of the late R.C. Sproul preaching on our text from Mark 6:30-44. He explained how many careless people, in their haste to follow Jesus, had forgotten to bring their lunches with them. However a very few had remembered, and the hungry multitudes looked with envy on those who had their packed lunches. Then Jesus performed a great ethical miracle: He persuaded the ‘haves’ to share with the ‘have nots’ so that everybody got to eat. He taught them how to be generous; you should be generous and share your lunch with others too!

What do you think? I remember becoming more and more uncomfortable as a listened to this theologian of great renown as he pretended to lift meaning out from the text of Scripture than I had never seen or heard before. R.C. Sproul was dramatically making a point about those who read things into the Bible that are not there whilst also ignoring the very vital truths that God reveals through His Word. Many of us know the works of R.C. Sproul and greatly appreciate His wisdom and insight. He was a faithful preacher of God’s Word.

Some of you may also know the name ‘Rudolf Bultmann’ (1884-1976). He was a 20th century German Lutheran Theologian (and professor of New Testament at the University of Marburg) who sought to ‘take the myths out of the New Testament’. He famously said, “*We cannot use electric lights and radios and, in the event of illness, avail ourselves of modern medical and clinical means and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament*”. Bultmann could not see how a person living in the modern world could believe in the supernatural miracles recorded in Scripture. The only rational explanation for him was that they are all myths.

So, perhaps ‘*the feeding of the five thousand*’ really is all about being willing to share your lunch with others who carelessly forgot theirs? No. This is not true. Did you know that the only miracle to be recorded in all four gospels (Matthew 14:13-21; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14), apart from the resurrection of Jesus, is this occasion when Jesus made a meal for about five thousand men? Mark, who is especially economical with his words and choices of which events in the life of Christ to record, includes this account of the feeding of the 5,000. In fact, not only does Mark select this event, he also includes another similar, but different occasion when Jesus fed about four thousand people by taking seven loaves and a few small fish (Mark 8:1-10).

What is so important about this work of Christ in making meals for many that Mark devotes so much attention in his short gospel to it? If we can answer that question then we will understand the central meaning of this portion of Scripture which, as we will see, has many significant links to other parts of the Bible and is most definitely not a moralistic lesson about generously sharing your lunch with others! Our three points this morning are:

1. Jesus is compassionate
2. Jesus is Lord
3. Jesus is the Creator
4. **Jesus is compassionate (verses 30-34)**

I love desolate, isolated places. During my life I have had the privilege of having visited some of the most uninhabited regions of the world, high mountains and deserts. For me, there is a profound tranquillity, a quiet peacefulness in being alone out in the wild. In Scripture, the wilderness is strongly associated with a place of testing and trial, as with the Israelites when they wandered through the barrenness of the Sinai Peninsula and with Jesus where He was tempted by Satan (Mark 1:120-13). The wilderness is also a symbol of rest in the Bible.

In the exodus from captivity in Egypt, the Israelites were led to rest from their oppressors. Judah’s exile in Babylon is likened to a wilderness experience before their restoration by the prophet Jeremiah: ‘*Thus says the LORD: "The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest”*’ (Jer 31:2).

It was to desolate places that the Lord Jesus went to pray alone (e.g. Mark 1:35) because he was constantly under pressure from the large crowds during His public ministry in Galilee (e.g. 3:20; 4:1; 5:24). If you are ‘peopled out’ the wilderness can provide rest. In our text, Mark describes the return of the apostles after Jesus had earlier sent them out with His authority to proclaim the gospel of repentance, cast out demons and heal the sick (6:7-13). These twelve men must have been tired from their work, because Jesus said to them: "*Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat*” (v31). The Greek word translated ‘desolate place’ here and repeated by Mark in the next verse (32) means a ‘*deserted place, an uninhabited region, a desert, a wilderness*’.

In order to leave the crowd behind, Jesus and His disciples got into a boat, just as they had done in the evening when Jesus calmed the storm (4:35-41). However, when the people saw where they were going, they ran around the lake shore, arriving before the disciples. I wonder how you and I would feel in a situation like that? Imagine that you have been very busy away at your workplace or at home with young children. You need a break! You are ‘all peopled out’. You are longing for some R&R (rest and relaxation). Finally, you get away to a secluded Airbnb, perhaps in an isolated spot by somewhere like Lake Heron. But when you get there all your work customers and suppliers have arrived before you! Or maybe it’s your children and/or your wider family. At other times you’d like to see them, but not now! You desperately need rest. So did Jesus and His disciples.

Yet when Christ went ashore and saw the great crowd gathered there waiting for Him, instead of getting back in the boat, or rebuking them for chasing after Him, Mark records that: “*He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd*” (v34). The Greek word translated ‘compassion’ means ‘to be moved to pity’. It describes a very strong feeling and is linked to the word for the inner organs, especially the bowels. We sometimes say in English ‘I have a gut feeling’. The word compassion here conveys that idea. Jesus had a deep-seated, heartfelt, affectionate, sympathetic pity and concern for the crowd. To put it simply ‘He cared for them greatly’.

Why? Because they had been abandoned by unfaithful leaders just as Old Testament Israel had been in the past. ‘*Their shepherds had led them astray*’ (Jer 50:6). Their rulers had not ‘fed the sheep’, nor brought back those who had strayed (Eze 34:1-10). Think back to ‘king’ Herod in the previous passage, feeding himself and the guests he wanted to impress, and agreeing to deliver up the head of John the Baptist to his evil wife. No compassion there.

So Jesus did not turn away from the crowd, instead ‘*He began to teach them many things*’ (v34). He fed them with the spiritual food of His Word because He is the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). Jesus is compassionate because He is the Son of God, ‘*the image of the invisible God*’ (Col 1:15) who is ‘*gracious and merciful*’ (Ps 145:8). Not only did Jesus teach the crowd there, He also taught His disciples as their Lord, which brings us to our second point:

1. **Jesus is Lord (verses 35-41)**

Whenever I have travelled in desolate places, I have always had a good supply of food with me, because by their very nature, such places are a long way from towns and villages. This is how it was as ‘it grew late’ that day. So the disciples came to Jesus to instruct Him about what He should do with the crowd. They said, “*Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat*." (Mark 6:36). This makes sense, the crowd got themselves into this situation, surely it was their responsibility to get some food for themselves. The problem was that in this desolate place they couldn’t feed themselves.

Jesus, the compassionate shepherd, instructed His disciples “*You give them something to eat*” (v37). Mark records their answer (which is another question): "*Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?*" (v37). Consider this carefully:

* There were about 5,000 men in the crowd. It has been estimated that with women and children also present, the total number of people was likely in excess of 10,000. By comparison, major neighbouring towns like Capernaum and Bethsaida had only 2,000-3,000 inhabitants each.
* 200 denarii was about 8 months wages for a day labourer. The disciples did not have this sum of money with them – they had just returned from their ministry tour with ‘*no money in their belts*’ (6:8).
* There were no towns or villages close by. This was a ‘desolate place’. The hour was late. In those days there were no shops open and certainly no retail outlet capable of supplying the needs of a crowd more than three times the size of any of the main settlements on the lake shore.

So we could reasonably paraphrase the disciples question like this: “*Shall we go and do the impossible?*” Although Mark doesn’t specifically record the tone of the disciples words, they do sound disrespectful. Something like “*Us give them something to eat? Yeh right!*” There was no natural way to feed so many people in a wilderness place where there was hardly any food. What little there was Jesus asked for.

So the disciples searched out to find anybody who had brought something to eat with them and all they found were ‘*five loaves and two fish*’ (v38). It was a ridiculously small quantity of food, utterly insufficient to feed even a small group of people, let alone a huge crowd the size of multiple large towns. Then Jesus commanded the people to sit down in groups ‘*by hundreds and by fifties*’ (v40); just as Moses had implemented structure into the camp of Israel in the wilderness after the Exodus (Ex 18:21). It’s also worth noting that grouping the people in this way made their total number much easier to estimate (v44).

The people reclined in groups on the ‘green grass’. After winter rains, the wilderness became pasture for a time. Jesus, the true leader, the Good Shepherd, makes the people ‘*lie down in green pastures*’ (Ps 23:1) to feed them and give them rest and to restore them. Then Jesus took the five loaves and the two fish and, looking up to heaven, he said a blessing (v41). In Judaism, it was a requirement that nothing be eaten without thanking God before and after the meal (ref. Lev 19:24; Deut 8:10). The normal practice for what we often refer to as ‘saying grace’ was to look downward, but in reliance upon His Father for the extraordinary power needed to feed the people, Jesus looked up.

Notice throughout this event that Jesus is Lord – He is the commanding leader, the godly King.

* He teaches the crowd
* He wisely instructs the disciples
* He locates the only naturally available food
* He commands the crowd
* He is willingly submissive to His Heavenly Father in prayer

Did the disciples believe that Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah, the Christ, the eternal King in the line of David who could do the impossible and supernaturally feed the crowd? What do the Scriptures reveal? After Jesus walked on the water of the lake, as revealed in the next passage (45-52), Mark recounts that the disciples ‘*did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened*’(v52). It is clear that at this point the disciples did not believe that Jesus is the Son of God. We can only imagine what the twelve were thinking as Jesus gave thanks for such a small quantity of food in front of such a huge gathering of hungry people. Presumably they, lacking in faith, were expecting a hugely embarrassing ‘public fail’ as the people remained unfed, and Jesus looked like a fool with a few scraps of someone else’s packed lunch.

Importantly though, later these disciples would come to confess their faith, through Peter as their spokesman “*You are the Christ*” (Mark 8:29). Then one of them would betray him, and the other eleven would desert their Lord. Later, as the Good Shepherd, He would restore them and then send them out in the power of the Holy Spirit to be His witnesses to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Where do you fit into this story? Do you believe that Jesus, the Son of God, can do the impossible? Do you believe that He is the compassionate Good Shepherd who says to anyone in need who will listen to Him: “*Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls*” (Matt 11:28-29). Jesus, and only Jesus, is able to provide you with all that you need with a super-abundance of grace, which brings us to our final point:

1. **Jesus is the Creator (verses 41-44)**

On some of my trips into remote areas I have taken freeze-dried food. It is very light and boiling it with water makes it swell back up close to its original size before being ‘shrunk and dried’. In that desolate place, Jesus took the five loaves and broke them, giving them to His disciples to ‘*set before the people*’. He also ‘*divided the two fish among them all*’ (v42). This was not a natural slight expansion of the volume of food as with a freeze-dried meal when water is added. This was a massive supernatural multiplication sufficient to more than meet the needs of all the people there.

Effectively it was the creation of food out of nothing, and this is what distinguishes this miracle from the many others that Jesus performed. Think about it. His wonderous works of healing were acts of restoring people back to what they once were. His casting out of demons were acts that showed His authority over the spiritual realm. His stilling of the storm showed His authority over this creation. When He turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana, He supernaturally transformed one liquid into another. There, in that wilderness, Jesus provided food ‘from heaven’ supernaturally created for the occasion. The uniquely creative work in this miracle is likely why it is included in all four gospels and why Mark records this type of miracle twice, once here with 5,000 men and once in chapter 8 (1-10) with 4,000 people fed.

This miracle clearly and dramatically points to the divine nature of Christ as the God who creates. Jesus, The Son of God is the One ‘*by whom all things were created…through him and for him*’ (Col 1:16). In the beginning God created everything by His Word ‘*so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible*’. The Scriptures do not reveal how the loaves and fish became so much food that the whole crowd were fed. We can truly say that this was a creative act of God.

It’s worth noting here that allfood production is fundamentally miraculous. In Psalm 65 David reveals that God is worthy of praise because He waters and greatly enriches the earth (v9). The valleys deck themselves with grain (v13). In Psalm 145 David declares “*The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing*” (Psalm 145:15-16). The complexity of living plants that grow and produce food is a ‘natural miracle’ that God has designed, created and now sustains. We can forget that it is miracle because we are so familiar with it. The complexity of living creatures, like fish, which are edible and nutritious for us is likewise a ‘natural miracle’ that God has designed, created and now sustains.

The ‘only’ difference with what Jesus did in that wilderness place was that it was a supernatural, not a natural, miracle. This points directly to who He is: Creator God in the person of the Son. Just as God provided the heavenly bread of manna in the wilderness so that each person could ‘*gather as much as he could eat*’ (Ex 16:18), so, the people in this wilderness ‘*ate and were satisfied*’ (v42) by the food that Jesus had created especially for them. Jesus is the New Moses leading a new exodus – from the Satan’s kingdom of death into His kingdom of life. He is also Himself the Bread of life who completely satisfies (John 6:35).

It was a regulation in Judaism that bread, a gift from God, that had fallen on the ground be collected up. Mark records that ‘*twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish*’ were taken up by the disciples (v43). The abundance of ‘left-overs’ bears witness to the completeness of the meal and confirms that the needs of the crowd for food had been fully satisfied. Jesus generously provided with super-abundant grace. Such is the character of God.

Just as the people in the wilderness could not feed themselves, so we like them, cannot save ourselves.We need God to provide heavenly bread - the bread of life. As John testifies for us brothers and sisters: “*And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ*” (John 1:16-17).

The number of baskets reflects the number of disciples, likely carrying one each. Twelve also mirrors the number of the tribes of Israel. Some have suggested that this points forward to the New Israel, God’s elect people who are the spiritual descendants of Abraham (Gal 3:29) and may also foreshadow the foundational role of the apostles in the New Testament church (Eph 2:20). This is certainly plausible. There is no indication in our text that the crowd were aware that this creative supernatural miracle had occurred. It seems that all they saw was the disciples handing out lots of food. The twelve though had seen what Jesus had done, but as we have already noted, they did not as yet understand who Jesus is (6:52).

Congregation, brothers and sisters in Christ, friends; God has set His Word before us today so that we may know that Jesus is the Son of God. He is compassionate as God is compassionate. He is the Lord of Lords, the Supreme ruler who can handle any situation in your life with the same grace and power that He dealt with the needs of the people that day in the wilderness.

Jesus calls you to come to Him in repentance and faith. He is God in human flesh able to create to provide for those in need. He is the Good Shepherd who makes those who trust Him lie down in green pastures. Jesus said, "*I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst*” (John 6:35).

There in that desolate place Jesus wasn’t teaching the people to share their lunch with those who had forgotten theirs. No. He was revealing His true identity to His disciples so that they could profess the truth “You are the Christ, the Son of God” “we trust you to provide all that we need to enter into the New Heavens and New Earth”. In that place and time there will be a feast, not just of simple bread and fish, but a sumptuous banquet at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. Come to Jesus in repentance and faith and know then that you too are invited to this meal that God will create for His many people

AMEN.