

‘Feeding the Five Thousand’ in the Gospel of John

By Colin Scott

Abstract

The author undertakes an exegesis of John’s account of Jesus’ ‘feeding of the five thousand’, by taking advantage of some appropriate academic sources in interpreting the text, and then showing how the insights gained might be helpfully integrated into a non-academic congregational sermon – a challenge that is regularly presented to the biblical interpreter and preacher. Overall, the article shows how an understanding of hermeneutical approaches to interpreting the Bible may benefit the contemporary understanding of the preacher and the congregation. In particular, a new appreciation of Jesus’ radical message about the nature of God’s kingdom is revealed in this familiar miracle story about loaves and fish, for the Christian community.

Exegesis Notes

The chosen biblical text for this exegesis and sermon is John 6:1-15, the feeding of the five thousand.

The first hermeneutical issue is one of approach. John’s gospel has a ‘literary-theological style’ (Scott 2003:1161), demanding ‘the capacity for a literary appreciation of John’s text ... for understanding his gospel’ (North 2007:345). John ‘freely organises his material according to his theological views’ (Kieffer 2010:186). Bultmann ‘thinks that a later redactor has reworked the gospel, adding to it sacramental and traditional eschatological material’ (cited by Kieffer 2010:186f). As Wright has said, ‘nothing in John’s gospel is there by accident’ (2002:71). Therefore, the interpretation of this text will not focus on historical readings, with a focus on the actual events. The fact that the story is reported in all four gospels means we need not necessarily worry about whether this *actually* happened. Instead, in looking at John’s particular treatment of this episode, focus can be given to his interpretation of the event, which means a more literary and especially a theological approach. As a framework for interpreting this passage, the quadriga will be used. Although this is generally associated with the Medieval period, it fits so well with John 6:1-15 that it seems as though the author was already applying such a framework to the original story. Briefly, this takes in four levels of interpretation: the literal sense, taking the

text at face value; the allegorical sense, taking the text to express doctrine; the tropological or moral sense, taking the text as guidance for behaviour; and, the anagogical sense, taking the text in eschatological terms (McGrath 2001:172f; Thiselton 1992:183). All of these levels of meaning can be mined from this passage, although the literal sense will be largely ignored, for the reasons cited above.

The setting of the incident, while not the central concern, is still of interest. The location is Galilee (6:1), but more important is when: it happens 'near' Passover (Beasley-Murray 1999:88; Wright 2002:72), one of the great Jewish feasts. The story is about a shared meal, not unlike Passover, yet also quite different from Passover.

The shared meal, the table fellowship, was a key aspect of Jesus' ministry. In fact, Bartchy has identified as a 'distinctive feature of Jesus' ministry' his

radically inclusive and non-hierarchical table fellowship as a central strategy in his announcement and redefinition of the inbreaking rule of God (Bartchy 1992:796).

Bartchy describes this as 'a living parable' of 'a renewed Israel', going on to talk of Jesus' use of food, drink and home images of the kingdom (1992:796, 799f). This seems to be a helpful model for reading John 6:1-15. This text carries references to the kingdom, to the church, and to the Eucharist, all of which are interrelated. These will be dealt with in reverse order, fitting the remaining three senses of the quadriga: for the allegorical, the Eucharist; for the moral, the church; and for the anagogical, the kingdom.

The story features 'words that recall the eucharist' (Kieffer 2010:202), or 'has a Eucharistic tone' (Gutiérrez 2011:200). The clearest echo in this connection is verse 11, which is very similar to Luke 22:19. Interestingly, Jesus distributes the bread himself in John's account, whereas in the synoptic parallels this is done by the disciples (Matthew 14:19; Mark 6:41; Luke 9:16; Beasley-Murray 1999:88). This distinction again aligns the story with the Eucharist. Both incidents take place at (or near) Passover, which formed the background of the Eucharist, both chronologically and theologically. John places the 'sacramental teaching in this setting and not in the Upper Room' (Beasley-Murray 1999:89). After all, it is not described by John as 'an act of compassion' (Beasley-Murray 1999:88). This looks back to the Exodus

(with its Passover setting, bread from heaven), as a sign of the 'second Exodus', and forward to the 'feast of the kingdom' (Beasley-Murray 1999:88). Morris (1995:300) counters the Eucharistic meaning of the miracle story, dismissing the idea as somehow diminishing the historicity of the account. This seems unnecessary, as the historicity of the account would surely enhance such an interpretation.

John has framed this story in terms of the church. He introduces the Passover (v.4), thereby possibly alluding to the Eucharist, and concludes with the attempt to crown Jesus as king (v.15), which could be interpreted as a skewed or 'inadequate' (Wright, 2002, p.74) confession that "Jesus is Lord", one of the first Christian creeds (McGrath 2001:354). It seems that this is a parable of the church, which is formed by and around the Eucharist, and which confesses that Jesus is Lord. The question then arises as to what he has to say about the church.

Bartchy (1992:796) has illustrated the social implications of the shared meal. The sense of community associated with table fellowship becomes an image of the inclusiveness of the church, ideally at least. This inclusiveness is exemplified particularly in John's detail of the boy, who is absent in the synoptics. Firstly, Morris points out the boy is a 'little boy', as a double diminutive is used (Morris 1995:304). Thus, he is of very low social standing. Coupled with this, his offering is barley loaves, which were eaten by the poor (Beasley-Murray 1999:84; Morris 1995:304; Painter 1992:83). The boy is, therefore, what Gutiérrez might call a 'non-person' (cited by Miller and Grenz 1998:149). Yet his contribution is central to the proceedings. It could then be inferred that the church should not only help, but include, value, and welcome the contribution of, the poor and marginalised.

Also, Gutiérrez suggests the twelve baskets of leftover constitute a 'calling' to followers of Jesus to build this inclusive community (2011:201f). Again, Bartchy speaks of the invitation to be 'guests and then hosts' (1992:800) at God's table, represented in the church, but ultimately realised in the kingdom.

And is it to that kingdom that this story, the Eucharist, and the church all point:

[The disciples] understood this act of Jesus to be the essence of the kingdom: communion with Christ and connection among human beings, communion and connection built through and expressed by sharing (Gutiérrez 2011:200)

Macquarrie has pointed out the relationship between the church and the kingdom, the latter being the fulfilment of the former (1977:386, 390). Again, Bartchy links the table, the church and the kingdom, where

‘Many will come from east and west, and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of Heaven’ (Mt 8:11 par. Lk13:29; see Is 25:6-8).
(Bartchy, 1992:799f)

Sermon

Introduction

In John 6:1-15 we read the story of Jesus feeding five thousand people. This is the only miracle reported in all four gospels, apart from the resurrection of Jesus. But the thing about John’s gospel is that it says things differently. Sometimes the order is different in John, things happen differently. John has quite a few things that are unique to his gospel. But John writes with a particular perspective on things. He’s writing more poetically than the other gospel writers. And he’s writing more theologically, in some ways. He wants to tell us some deep things about Jesus, about God, about life.

So, when John tells us about Jesus feeding the five thousand, he doesn’t just want to tell us what happened. He wants to tell us what it means. Note that John calls the miracles ‘signs’, which means they point to something else... And it seems to me that John is telling this story to say something about the church.

Passover

Let’s take a moment to look at the setting of this story: it’s set by the Sea of Galilee. But more important, John wants us to know when this story happened: near Passover. Passover was possibly the biggest of the Jewish feasts, commemorating the Exodus from Egypt, when God redeemed the Israelites from slavery and oppression, leading them ultimately into the promised land of Canaan. The Passover was the first step toward the new life as the people of Israel, a holy nation, a royal priesthood – God’s people. And here, John tells us about an incident that occurs near Passover. And the incident involves a shared meal. Like Passover. The shared meal was central to Passover. In those days, a shared meal meant ‘friendship, intimacy... unity’ (Bartchy, 1992:796). It’s a bit like going for dinner on a date. Or a wedding meal. Think about how that works. We invite, or we’re invited.

We share together, not just in the food, but in something deeper: on a date, it's about a relationship; at a wedding, it's about celebrating together. Passover was usually eaten with your family, or close friends. But here, you could say Jesus has a Passover meal with five thousand people.

The thing about the Passover meal for us, as Christians, is the new significance Jesus gave it. At His last supper, the night before His crucifixion, Jesus shared a Passover meal with His disciples. And He told them that the bread they ate was His body, a symbol of His sacrifice for them, for everyone. That meal is re-enacted regularly in many churches today, as communion, the Lord's Supper, or Eucharist. It's widely seen as central to the church's life and worship. But what is really central is what it symbolises: we are a community, or a communion, formed by and around Christ's sacrifice. So, in that sense, you could say we, the church, are a Eucharistic community.

An interesting thing is that the other three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, all record Jesus doing that with the disciples, breaking the bread and saying those words at the last supper. But John tells us here that 'Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated...' (John 6:11). And here's how Luke records the Last Supper. 'Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them...' (Luke 22:19). It seems to me like John is talking about the Eucharist. This story is John's version of the Eucharist, the new Passover meal that is central to the church, that forms the church.

Church

So this crowd could be the church. There's five thousand of them, no doubt from all walks of life. I'm sure they probably don't all know each other. And they're all invited to share the same table, with Jesus and with each other. Isn't that what the church is about? This invitation to share the table with Jesus and each other. An invitation to everyone. Read what Jesus says about the kingdom of God. He often talks about it as a feast. The church isn't the kingdom. But the church is a symbol of the kingdom, here and now. So people should get a glimpse of the kingdom in the church. So the feast of the kingdom will have people of all sorts coming from east and west, and sitting down at the same table.

John gives us a great example of this by telling us about the boy. It's only John's version of this story that features the boy, who brings his bread and fish. But the Greek word that John uses means a 'little boy'. He's not just a boy, he's a little boy. Children were quite low on the social ladder in those days. So a little boy is almost insignificant in the world. And what's more, he has barley loaves. Barley loaves were the bread of the poor. So he's a poor little boy. He's almost at the bottom of the barrel. Yet this little boy, insignificant though he may seem, is included; is given special mention; and actually makes a contribution. And that's important. It's a lesson, I think, that anyone and everyone not only can belong to the church, and to God's kingdom. But actually, they all, we all, have something to contribute too.

And this is about sharing. Sharing the table, sharing our lives, and sharing what we have. A Peruvian priest called Gustavo Gutiérrez, who recognised that the church and its theology didn't connect with the experience of the very poor, has said that this story teaches us to 'learn to give from our poverty' and that we need to share, no matter how much or how little we've got (Gutiérrez 2011:200).

It's interesting that John doesn't have his Eucharist in the Upper Room, like in the other Gospels. He has it outdoors. Really, this could be anywhere. Like the church... Wherever the community of believers is, that's the church. Wherever we confess that Jesus is Lord. And that's another thing that tells me John is talking about the church here. The story finishes with the crowd recognising that Jesus is a prophet they had been expecting, another Moses. But actually, He's more, and they decide they want to crown Him as king. Of course, they probably see Him as a king who will lead them into battle against Rome. But they're close. Jesus is king. He is Lord. And when we acknowledge Him as King and Lord, we are the church. Wherever we are. Whoever we are.

When everybody's had their fill of bread, there are twelve baskets of leftovers, which Jesus has told the disciples to gather up. Interesting that, isn't it? Twelve disciples, twelve baskets. It's almost like the disciples, Jesus' followers, are being invited to do it all over again. Keep it for next time. So that they can be the church somewhere else. Who knows who they might share that bread with? But that's what the church is about. We are called to share bread, share the table, with whoever we find. Who might that be? Who is in your crowd? Where are we going to share our bread?

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