

Hanover International Worship 18.7.2010

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity: OT Ex 16 – NT Joh 6,1-15

A preacher felt that he should underline the point of his sermon with a visual demonstration.

So he put some worms in a jar full of smoke,  
some others he put in a jar of alcohol  
In a third jar he put worms in chocolate sauce,

So he preaches his sermon on human vices, lifting up each glass in conclusion:

“Cigarettes – Dead!”

“Alcohol – Dead!”

“Chocolate – Dead!”

“Now what does that teach us?” –

A little voice from the back: “As long as you smoke, drink and eat plenty of chocolate you will not have worms.”

Dear brothers and sisters,

Sermon illustrations can go horribly wrong.

There is the risk that the example brings home a completely different point from what the preacher intended, like in the little story.

Sermon illustrations can take on a life of their own.

Today's gospel story is a point in case: Nobody remembers what Jesus preached, but they remembered what he did.

Unfortunately, I cannot give you Jesus' lost sermon. Today, I want to stick to the story of the loaves and the fishes. I want to have a look into the story and try to understand, what it might have meant to the five thousand people whom Jesus fed.

In my mind, it is about greatness. It is about the overflowing grace of God. This is what we see and what the people experience. It is so great, they cannot take it all in. That's why they forget the words. That's why the action, the miracle stands out so much.

This is a story about the greatness of God because he is not discouraged by the fact that there is not enough food to go round.

It is about God, who feels responsible for his people and who provides plenty. Even more than plenty.

We see a miracle – there is no way this could have been achieved any other way. That is the reason why Jesus asks his disciples: “Where shall we buy bread for these people?”.

We understand: Only a miracle can help. Philip says it: “Eight months' wages would not be enough for each one to have a bite.” There is no way they could buy enough bread anywhere near, and also they probably don't have such an amount anyway.

A miracle is needed. Bread from Heaven is the answer. The place and the time recall Israel's history: they are at the far end of the Sea of Galilee, back on the other side of the Jordan, and “The Jewish Passover Feast was near”. It brings back memories of Israel's time in the desert, where God had provided them with

heavenly manna to feed on. For forty years they did not have to worry about their food, for forty years they could just gather up what was there. It recalls the good old times in the desert. It recalls God's presence amongst his people: when God was continuously with them. A sign of His care for the children of Israel. These memories come back and with them the realization: He is here – now. It is happening again – now.

A new time of salvation is here.

The manna stopped after the Israelites had crossed the river Jordan into the Promised Land when they started eating food produced in the land.

But now they have gone back. They have re-entered that special God-time, where God is close and provides them with what they need. It is as if they are re-living those old stories.

And yet, they experience more than that. This time, there is a curious connection between their lives and the miracle. It is not just a Bread from Heaven.

It is their barley bread and their fish that form the basis of this miracle. The miracle somehow starts with them and their lives.

In the old times, the produce of the land stopped the flow of Bread from Heaven, but now the produce of the land forms the basis of it. The starting point of the kingdom of Heaven is firmly rooted amongst them. It does not come from another world, but it happens here, within and amongst our world.

Barley bread and fish. The food of ordinary people. No sticky honey pearls. But proper bread to get one's teeth in.

There are more differences between the story of the Manna and Jesus feeding the five thousand:

Jesus' miracle is a one off at a moment of need.

And at the same time it is happening on a much bigger scale. It seems to come with no limitations.

This bread is not measured like the manna. With the Manna, everybody had to collect the same amount. And if you didn't, then you would still have the same amount anyway.

But here is so much more bread. An absolutely huge amount of it. This gift of bread is overflowing! Like some miraculous breadbasket from a fairy-tale. More bread than anyone could ever eat.

Is this a sign for the beginning of the kingdom of God?

Some people surely thought so and said to themselves:

*I was hungry, and he has fed me. That's good!*

*I had no bread, and now I have enough bread. I like that principle for the future.*

*This is what a proper king should be doing. Let's make him our king!*

But they haven't understood Jesus. The great amount of bread has misled the people.

That's why Jesus withdraws. And why he comes back the next day to explain to them about the Bread of Life in another great sermon.

But what is the meaning of this huge amount of bread. What are we to make of it?

The story reports that twelve baskets full of bread were collected at the end, after the meal. I don't know how big these baskets were. Our tabletop bread-

baskets are quite small. Shopping-basket size? I always imagine them to be really big baskets, like washing baskets or like the ones you see on markets. But whatever their size: it is clear, that there was plenty more bread going round at the end than there was at the beginning.

The reason given for the collecting of bread is a bit obscure: “Let nothing be wasted” (NIV) or “... that nothing be lost” (AV). But there is no further explanation.

I ask myself – what would they do with all this bread that they have collected? Take it home? Distribute it to the poor? We do not learn about its fate...

I have a suspicion that it was collected for our own sake. So that we can see the size of the miracle. That we might see that something extraordinary, something really big has happened. The bread was collected so that we can learn how many baskets were left over.

So that we realise that something bigger than the feeding of the Israelites in the desert is happening here. In the old times God had provided “Bread of Heaven” during the journey of the Israelites.

And one Omer, one pot, of extra Manna was to be collected on God’s command: “Fill an omer of it to be kept for your generations; that they may see the bread wherewith I have fed you in the wilderness, when I brought you forth from the land of Egypt.”

So collecting the “Bread of Heaven” has a precedent. It shows the greatness of God. It serves as an example, a reminder of his grace, his power, and his

providence. It is a sign how he is with us on our journey and how he supports and sustains us.

Jesus has not one but 12 basketfuls collected. But he didn't mention a display. Unless we count the literary display in the Bible. In my mind, those twelve baskets are for us.

Here is bread in great quantity. Far more than anyone can eat. Twelve baskets – after all the locals have eaten...

Another story from the New Testament springs to mind: I remember the Syro-Phenician woman who begged Jesus to help her – an unbelieving stranger – on the grounds that even the dogs get the crumbs, the leftovers from under the table. (Mark 7,24-30 )

The remaining bread, the crumbs in twelve baskets: could that not be a sign meaning: there is enough bread left for everybody to the ends of the world?

Bread from Heaven not only for Israelites, but for everybody under the sun? Then these twelve baskets would be a sign for what is still to come. Set aside to feed the nations.

A sermon illustration can be deceptive. For the 5000 men in the story, it was the feeding of the hungry that convinced them to make Jesus their king.

Sermon illustrations can be deceptive. And the same goes for all the miracles that Jesus worked.

A lot of the time, people didn't get them. It goes on today. We cannot just look at the glorious miracles, the amazing teaching, or the heartfelt fellowship.

Only when we look at the other side of Jesus' life we get the whole picture: his struggles, his suffering, his death and resurrection.

So if we look beyond the story of the loaves and fishes, we cannot but think of the Last Supper: Jesus takes the bread, breaks it and says: This is my body, given for you.

In the bread, Jesus gives himself. This is another Bread of Heaven. And the picture of the twelve baskets would serve it well as a sermon illustration.

Because in all the greatness, the overflowing gift of the twelve baskets of bread we perceive that there is a gift greater than food.

Amen.