

## Fish for a day, or fishing for a lifetime?

John 6:1-13

1 Kings 17: 8-16

We have just heard a familiar event recorded in the Old Testament. Elijah, the iconic prophet, the scourge of the spiritually corrupt and pagan monarchy, the confronter of kings, the nemesis of the prophets of Baal. In this story it is a case of out of the frying pan and into the fire. Elijah had defied King Ahab and declared that God would stop the rains until further notice. He had taken refuge in the Kerith Ravine drinking from the brook and being fed by ravens, but now the brook had dried up and God tells him to move on. To all places, Zarephath. This is in Philistine country, modern day Lebanon, the very hotbed of pagan Baal-worship and the home of Jezebel, Ahab's wife. Not only that but now also Elijah is to go to a widow – not a well-to-do Israelite lady able to support him – but a poor, destitute Gentile woman, on her last legs as the famine affects her country just as badly as it does Israel. He probably thought it made more sense to wait beside a dry brook.

As we first read it Elijah seems not to understand the situation; he doesn't offer any personal assistance, never mind procuring heavenly provision for the woman and her son. Rather he puts additional strain on their meagre resources, requesting for *his personal consumption* the little water and the morsel of bread they have left.

But then at the same time he reveals that if this widow offers what she has to this man of God – and she recognises him as such – then God will provide food enough not just for this day, but for the duration of the famine.

Heaven's provision is achieved only through a human agent. It is the widow who has to do something.

Nearly a millennium later on a mountainside part of what is today known as the Golan Heights, through another human agent – a small poor boy (loaves made from barley were only for the poor) – God in Jesus is able to provide for the needs of many. In this case a crowd of 5000 men plus women and children, and disciples who had found themselves caught out, overstretched, short of resources, seeking nourishment without the prospect of provision.

Now two millennia later still, there is crisis of provision in this world. We saw the stark reality with the children and the breadsticks. Where or who is the human agent for God to act? We'll come back to that.

Let's look at these two stories from three aspects: Bringing to Jesus; God's bountiful provision, and Who's in control here?

### Bringing to Jesus

When Elijah calls for water, the widow responds immediately, instinctively, perhaps culturally conditioned to be hospitable, and she goes to fetch the water. But for Elijah to then ask for bread seems just going too far, what an audacious request. But Elijah declares that God will provide for them all; he asks the widow to put her trust in this Great Power of God. For you see she had lost **hope** whereas the prophet had **faith**.

In John's account of the feeding of the multitude he specifically mentions two disciples. Philip, is tested by Jesus about buying bread – quite naturally as Philip was from the local area from Bethsaida. But Philip declares that the situation is **hopeless**, nothing can be done. His response is natural, but perfectly human in its understanding of the occasion. He is practical in his calculation, but misses the critical, heavenly, part of the equation.

In contrast, it is Andrew who says, in effect, "I'll see what I can do and I'll **trust** Jesus to do the rest." He asks, ".. how far will ... five small barley loaves and two small fish... go among so many?" A question that might be rhetorical, but then might be from one now understanding Jesus and therefore asked seeking a divine answer.

It has been said that every miracle, large or small, begins with an act of obedience. The widow, the young boy, Andrew – all had little to offer but offer they did. The widow didn't turn around to Elijah and say "Let us eat first, charity begins at home, I cannot be expected to give, having so little, and not knowing, when it is gone, where to obtain more!"

What about you and what about me? Is the world being denied a miracle because we will not bring to Jesus what we have and what we are? There is no saying what He could do with us and through us! But if we offer nothing, he will have nothing to use. But he can take what little we have and turn it into something great.

Don't let our estimate of what can and can't be done keep us from taking on a task! What talent or resource do we have that God could use to help others? Or if we pooled our time and resources with others, what special project could we accomplish? I pray that the two evening events arranged for men and for women this week and next will speak as fine examples of this.

Andrew brought that lad to Jesus and by doing so made the miracle possible. No one knows what might come out of it when we introduce someone to Jesus. We can only point and show and share. It is then God who does the rest. It may be our own family or friends, those given into our care or responsibility, or neighbours or people we work or play alongside. We do not know what will happen, to what heights God may raise them to, and it may be beyond our wildest expectations.

William Barclay tells the story of an old German school teacher who, when he entered his class of boys in the morning, used to remove his cap and bow ceremoniously to them. One asked him why he did this. His answer was: "You never know what one of these boys may someday become." He was right - because one of them was Martin Luther.

### God's provision is bountiful

In the miracle in Elijah's time, the flour and the oil kept up with the demands and needs of the household – "there was food every day" for the woman and her son and her lodger. Note that God did not provide a great barrel of flour and a vat of oil. No, only what was needed day by day. In a practical sense that would leave her less at risk, for surely word would soon get around of her windfall and then theft – or worse – would be likely. But each day the act of faith of going to the jar and jug was re-enacted, and so was rewarded with what was needed. No more, no less.

And on that mountainside we read that all were satisfied – which says much that it was a full meal, not a symbol act, or, shall we say, a symbolic snack. In fact there were leftovers, hardly likely if the crowd were unsatisfied. Twelve baskets might sound rather a lot, but unlike the picture I had always had as a youngster of the disciples crippling themselves by manoeuvring enormous wicker laundry baskets full to the brim with bits of bread and fish. No, because they were probably a basket called a *kophinos* carried by each disciple. This was a small bottle-shaped basket which no Jew travelled without. It was

carried in part because a Jew would need to carry their own food if they were to observe the Jewish rules of cleanness and uncleanness. From the fragments each of the disciples filled his basket. Even then it is likely the fragments would not go to waste. God's bounty is more than enough. His provision matches our needs just as it matched their needs.

How often do we forget this? Yet, there are many in this congregation, and others known by this congregation, who have testified how God has provided for them in times of need.

But equally I think there is the lesson for us here that we do not hope that we would get more than we need. Hard as that may seem to be, and hard as it may be to live with.

If I may return to our topical theme, in Christian Aid Week. There is indeed enough to feed this world, it's just that it is not equally distributed across the human population. And as the population grows, practice and technology, in themselves gifts from God, will I have no doubt be able to keep pace, but still that inherent unfairness needs to be addressed.

The flour and the oil multiplied not when they were hoarded but when they were used for all.

That is something that is being addressed by organisations like Christian Aid. In particular this year more than a hundred organisations are involved in the **IF campaign** to tackle the root causes of hunger.

Working on the ground through local partner groups who know the needs of the population, but also raising awareness of a more holistic approach to poverty – where causes of injustice and unfairness – unfair trade arrangements, corporate tax dodging in poor countries, and environmental irresponsibility – factors which can indirectly, or directly, affect the lives and welfare of hundreds of millions, if not billions

### Beyond our control – who's in charge here?

We noted that the woman who helped Elijah was a widow. She and her son are up against it – profoundly threatened in a world that seems to conspire against them. For them there are no government benefits, no widow's pension, no hardship fund or food bank to call upon. The drought adds to their plight, like any natural disaster – and we have seen floods, snow, and drought affect even this country over the past twelve months – but this natural disaster has a

spiritual dimension. The drought is God's sign that He, not Baal, has control, and can, if necessary, withhold the rain from the earth. She has no power to procure a husband to look after her and her son. Helplessly she has seen her son grow thin and listless, no doubt she has already sacrificed some of her portion for him, and in all likelihood fretted over the possibility that she would die before him.

In short, she is at the mercy of social, political, natural and spiritual forces. Perhaps, Philip and the other disciples, in their own context, felt the same – overwhelmed by the magnitude of their feeding problem, devoid of resources or a financial solution.

We may feel ourselves that things are beyond our control. Squeezed by inflation, rocked by precarious employment, harmful legislation, banks too big to fail, posturing and the threat of war in the Far East, civil war tearing apart a country not many miles from Zarephath, work and safety conditions cheapening life in a Bangladesh garment factory. And the fact that one in eight go to bed hungry each night.

In short we are not the masters of our destiny that we like to think that we are.

But the widow and her son do survive, and why - because of those words of comfort from Elijah, "Do not be afraid". Words also spoken by Isaiah to the exiles in Babylon, words spoken by the angel to a young girl about to become pregnant, and to the visitors to the tomb.

So indeed there are forces in the world we cannot control, but there is a far greater power at work. The power of grace.

Prospects song – Do not be afraid I am with you

Psalm 56:3-4 When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid.

Put away your fears and trust in Him!

This past week I did some travelling and during a particularly tedious flight I started scanning one of the magazines provided in the little pockets which also has the instructions on how to evacuate the aircraft after a crash landing and the ubiquitous paper sick bag. Anyway, the magazine was filled with 'ideal' gifts to purchase, many of them gadgets for satisfying needs you never knew you had.

What caught my eye was the heading – **The Greatest Gift is to help others help themselves** – and it brings me to the original title for today - *“Fish for a day, or fishing for a lifetime?”*

I’m sure most of you know the saying that goes something like:  
*Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; show him how to catch fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.*

Which means that it is far better to help someone practically to help themselves than to simply provide a quick fix handout.

This is the type of sustainable development has long been the approach by charities and organisation like Christian Aid, Cafod, World Vision, and Oxfam for decades.

But I wonder can we take this phrase into another context?

The feeding of the 5000 is the only event, other than the Resurrection, to be found in all four gospels. And when John included it in his account, he highlighted it as one of the ‘signs’ that Jesus offered to his audience. We’ve heard about them during the series on John earlier this year. John called them signs because they lead people to seek for Jesus. So maybe on that mountainside giving someone a fish for a day (accompanied some dry barley bread), did lead to fishing for a lifetime, that they went on to fish or seek for the One who could, and can, sustain and forgive and redeem. This coming week at the Men’s Event, fish will be on the menu, which may be for someone just the start of a lifetime seeking Jesus. Are we fishing for Jesus, or have we found him?

As we often sing:

*I will worship*

*With all of my heart.*

*I will praise You*

*With all of my strength.*

*I will seek You*

*All of my days.*

*I will follow*

*All of Your ways.*

(David Ruis)