

'Gather up the fragments' (Jn. 6:1-13)

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I imagine the scene opens with humour. We don't usually depict Jesus as pranking the disciples, but I can't think of any other way to read this: a huge crowd, five thousand men and who knows how many women and children, are walking towards Jesus and his disciples, like the numberless orcs of Isengard approaching the few defenders of Helm's Deep. With a glint of mischief, Jesus surveys the low rolling hills covered with grass as far as the eye can see, a couple of fishing huts gathered on the beach, maybe, but nothing like a town that could provide catering for five thousand at the drop of a hat. And he walks up to Philip: 'Where are we going to buy bread for them, Philip?'

I imagine Philip's eyes, momentarily wide as dinner plates, not even being able to begin to point out how ridiculous this idea is in the middle of nowhere, but then they soften as he gets the joke. He retorts: 'You want to feed them? Then show me the cold, hard cash. You would need something like the Ashmolean's collection to feed these people, and last time I checked, you're broke. I'll show you the bakery when you show me the money.' (In case you were wondering, the Ashmolean's Roman golden coin collection could have hosted this lunch about seventy-five times.) At this point, Andrew wants to get in on the fun. 'Hey Jesus, you want to feed them? I have a small boy's lunch, here. Five barley rolls; two sardines.' Jesus smiled: 'Perfect'.

And just like that, a joke in the wilderness became a feast. Everyone ate as much as they could, and Jesus ends by saying, 'Gather all the fragments, let nothing be wasted.' And it filled twelve baskets. I can imagine Jesus distributing them, one to each of the Twelve.

Can you picture the scene? Can you enter into it with your imagination? How does Jesus look at them? What are the disciples thinking as they receive their basket?

Some, no doubt, are thinking about Moses, and how God provided manna, a sort of sweet bread, in the Exodus account for the people of Israel. Perhaps they are putting together Jesus crossing a sea and then going up a mountain, just like Moses. Perhaps one is thinking back a couple weeks (as we could) to the wedding at Cana, where Jesus similarly produced way too much wine. It is an interesting parallel, because John makes nothing of the fish. Either there were not any leftovers, or he doesn't bother to mention them. But wine? And bread? There is far too much left over. More than enough for one more meal in the upper room.

What does the bread mean? I want to talk about it in three different ways: three different perspectives that will allow us to think of this bread in different ways. Think of it like looking into a giant aquarium from three different portholes, or if any of you went to see the Mary Rose in Portsmouth before it opened entirely, it was all boarded up, but at different levels you could look through the windows and see the keel here, or part of the upper deck over there. That's what I have for you tonight: three small glimpses of a rich subject.

First, Jesus is the bread. Later in this chapter, Jesus claims that he himself is the bread of life. Not that he can provide bread to eat (which he can), but that he is, himself, the enduring bread. He says: 'Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which anyone may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live

forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.’ (Jn. 6:49-51). You don’t need me to expound on the Eucharistic overtones of the passage. But do think how shocking this would have been to the first crowd, indeed, so many are so offended by Jesus claims that at the end of chapter six we are told that many choose not to follow him. They turned their backs on him.

If Jesus is the bread, the miracle of the feeding of five thousand tells us two things: first, there is enough of Jesus to go around. Indeed, there is more left over at the end than there was at the beginning. Jesus is a source of life that is not depleted as you draw on him, but is made more abundant the more you rely on him. Second, if Jesus is the bread, then we find that it is bread that not many can stomach. Jesus’ teachings are hard to follow. Love your enemies. Serve those who use you. Give generously to all who ask of you. I’m surprised that it is only at Jesus saying that you have to eat his flesh and drink his blood that people start getting antsy. Jesus asks everything of those who follow him – not because he is jealous of them, but because you can’t multitask the spiritual life.

Second, the bread is just the normal bread of the world, the food we eat every day. If we think of it not as representing anything, but just as bread, it is significant that Jesus says, ‘Gather up all the fragments, don’t let anything be lost.’ A report in 2017 estimated that the UK threw away £13 billion worth of food in the last year, more than 4.4m tonnes of food that was perfectly edible. As stewards of this world, pilgrims who pass through a world not our own, and in light of the estimated eight million people in the world with chronic malnourishment, this should not be. If you waste food, stop it. Stop making excuses and change the way you live. There is always enough of the bread of life that Jesus

provides, but the bread of the earth is a limited and precious commodity, and we urgently need to live differently.

Third, we are the bread. What I am going to do next would horrify the people who first taught me to preach. We are going to go allegorical here, folks. Because as I read this, over and over again, I could not help but read myself into those fragments, broken from pouring myself out into work and people and caring. And Jesus saying, ‘gather up the fragments, let nothing be wasted’, becomes a tender phrase of care.

It is fairly easy to end up feeling fragmented, especially during the rush of term. We commit to too much, all good things, and then are pulled in multiple directions. After a few weeks, the cracks and strains begin to show. We begin to drop a ball here or there, are perhaps, shorter with others than we would like. But our efforts are not wasted: tutorial papers are produced and marked, friends in crisis are cared for, in short, if we are the bread in this picture, the purpose for which it was made is carried out: people are fed. And when the day is done, and no one else has seen the hours spent in office or library, in the late (or early) hours finishing that tute paper or doing that admin, or caring in the way that I know so many of you care for those around you, Jesus is there to make sure that the fragments are gathered up, ready to be put back together. Later in the chapter, just after Jesus claims to be the bread of life, he says: ‘All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away... I shall lose none of all those the Father has given me, but will raise them up at the last day.’ (Jn. 6:37-39).

Jesus will not lose those given to him, those fragmented bits. Bread is made to be eaten, it’s not a bad thing for it to be broken at

times. Lots of things need to be strained to work, and even though Oxford pushes us to our limits, that is how our limits can be exceeded. That is, for example, exactly how muscles are made strong. The muscle fibres are strained by exercise, and the microfibrils of the muscle even break apart. But with rest they heal and are made stronger than before. Either extreme, never exercising or exercising until the muscle breaks entirely are both bad. But feeling the strain, as we all are at this point in time, is part of what we are meant to do. But our efforts will all be gathered up, none of them will be lost, nor will we be.