

The Company Picnic

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 June 1991

Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 0 0] Such a lovely day. You're here and not there, wherever there might be, but I imagine you could think of a lot of places where you might be. I'll just tangle myself up in this in the hopes that I won't get untangled before it's all over.

The story then is the story, which I've called it today, the company picnic, because there's 5,000 people out and they have basically salmon sandwiches and just lack hard-boiled eggs, and they would still be very contemporary.

But there is the story in front of you, and I want just initially to detail the story for you, and I want to do it because this is a very decisive story in the history of the life and work and ministry of Jesus Christ, simply because this was the watershed that a lot of disciples, in the Gospel of John, a lot of disciples followed him eagerly, curiously, wonderingly up to this point, and at the point of this story today, a lot said, I'm going no further.

That's as far as I'm going to go. It's important for another reason, and that is that this is a story which is told in the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of Luke, and the Gospel of John.

So it appears everywhere in all the four Gospel accounts of the life of Christ, with significant and meaningful variations in them, but the story that we're looking at today is certainly the story that appears in the Gospel according to St. John, which some people consider to be relatively later in having been put together than the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

[1 : 5 7] One of the reasons they think it's later, if you look in verse 1 of chapter 6, it refers to the Sea of Tiberias. And the Sea of Tiberias got its name from the city of Tiberias, and the city of Tiberias was built by Herod the Great during the lifetime of Jesus.

So that it was a brand new city. It was a Roman city, as you can tell, named after a Roman emperor as the Herods were inclined to do, you know, calling Caesarea, Tiberias, and names like that.

So that it's referred to as the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. Some scholars take to mean that this Gospel is later because no other Gospel refers to the Sea of Tiberias except the Gospel of John.

So this is the story. They are at the north end of the Sea of Galilee, 14 miles long and 9 miles across.

They're at the north end up in the area called Galilee, near Bethsaida, which is the home of three of the disciples that we know, and that is Philip, Andrew, and Peter.

[3 : 1 2] It's the fourth of the seven signs in the Gospel of John, all of which I hope by now you're totally familiar with. You know, there's the...

And then I forget. There's the changing of the water into wine, the healing of the nobleman's son, the healing of the man by the pool of Bethesda, and then this fourth one, which is the feeding of the 5,000.

So... And it's done, basically, as you know, because it's Christ taking into his hands the lunch or picnic of a small boy which consisted of five barley loaves, which are the poor man's bread was made of barley, and presumably two dried fish from the Sea of Galilee.

The story begins, in a sense, with Jesus turning to the disciples and saying, you see that crowd coming towards us over there, of which we later learned there were at least 5,000.

He said, how are we going to feed them? Which is a wonderful question. I mean, it's a question because it's one of the fundamental questions in the whole of our world.

[4 : 40] Every day you have portrayed before you a starving mass of people who need to be fed. Every day you go out to work because you have the problem of putting bread on the table.

You justify most of your materialistic way of life on the grounds that, well, I've got to put bread on the table.

I mean, that's the clincher, isn't it? And so this is a really basic human problem. How do you put bread on the table for a crowd of 5,000 that are approaching you?

And he asks the disciples, because it's not a general question right now, it's one specifically for the disciples, which it says that Jesus asks, knowing all along what he himself was going to do.

So that one of the existential realities of life from which we cannot escape is the question, how are you going to feed them? There is a magnificent picture in the Manchester Guardian this week of a woman from Sabra, is it in the south of Iraq, with her sick and probably dying child.

[6 : 04] And she's looking at, she is a beautiful woman. If ever there was a lovely photograph of a woman and child, that's it. And that picture is a poignant expression of the quiet despair that infiltrates the whole of conscious humanity, that here is the human problem, how are you going to meet it?

And so this story that we're looking at today is a magnificent story because it so poignantly expresses in a way that anybody can understand, be he Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Jew, Muslim, secularist, New Ager, or whatever, that there is a fundamental human need that anybody with an ounce of care and compassion in their hearts knows has to be met.

It's an inescapable question. And Christ addresses this question to one of his disciples and says, how are you going to do it? I went and visited a good friend of mine yesterday who's been an Anglican all his life.

And I said, do you believe? And he said, no, I don't. And I said, why don't you? And he said, because we haven't solved the problem of how to put bread on the table.

Now, there are variations on this, and he explained the variations. People that die young, suffering, children that are hungry. And he just took this universal human problem, which expresses the reality of universal human need, and said that while I might be tempted to believe in Jesus Christ, I cannot believe that there is a God when this condition obtains among people.

[7 : 56] Now, you know how many people are stopped right there in any consideration of faith in God. The only conclusion they can come to for their life is that it's a human problem, and if I can meet it, I will, and if I can't, I'll do the best I can for myself and my own family.

And that's so that you can see how in this simple story, the human dilemma is very clearly portrayed, and one that we all feel very deeply.

Andrew, with a sense of great futility, comes up to Jesus at this point and says, this is of no value, I'm sure, but here are five loaves and two fish.

And I think that is a wonderful event. I think it's a wonderful event because it is the response in a crowd of 5,000 people of one person.

Somehow that one person did one simple thing. And I think we look at the vastness of the human problem, and we decide that we must do something vastly heroic to solve the human problem, and unless we have presented to us the vastly heroic thing that we can do, we simply close our eyes to the human problem.

[9 : 30] But this man brought five barley loaves and two fish. It was a foolish thing to do. It was a piddlingly insignificant thing to do.

It was, in a sense, a confession of despair. The extent of the problem, on the one hand, and the uselessness of this answer to it, on the other hand.

But I think in that is contained something that is absolutely essential to Christian faith. And that is, you may not be able to solve this, but you, in the circumstances of your personal life, can exercise some kind of personal obedience.

There is something you can do. And that is not to be filled with despair, but to do something. And so Andrew is rightly St. Andrew because he responded in this way.

He seems to have been a kind of fringe member, somebody who would sit back about there and see the need of somebody over there and go and deal with it while perhaps everybody else thought the action was up here.

[10 : 48] But what's significant, the thing that happened on the fringe was the important thing. And I might, well, anyway, I just tell you that because it seems such a wonderful thing.

The next thing that happens is in the order of modern contemporary life, a miracle as well, and that was, Jesus had them sit down in groups of 150 and 50s.

Now, you know what happens when a food supply helicopter comes over a hungry crowd in northern Iraq? You know that absolute chaos reigns and people climb on top of each other, trample each other into the ground because they want to get at what's there.

Now, how was it possible with a crowd as vast as this that Jesus was able to set them down in hundreds and fifties and they were there in order that he could make the distribution to them that he needs?

There's all sorts of wonderful analogies that you could take from that. I remember the Patty Hearst story.

[12 : 04] Remember when the family was required to bring free food onto the streets of Los Angeles or somewhere and created a riot almost immediately because they were trying to give away free food.

Giving away something free is very difficult. It's just, it's almost impossible because it's so hard to do.

And yet, the one part of the story I think you need to remember is that Christ set them down in fifties and a hundreds so that they could do it. Then it says that Christ himself took the bread in his hands and broke it.

And he took the fish and broke it. And this story, different from the other synoptics, says he distributed it to them. Now obviously he didn't.

I mean, I have to contradict the Bible at this point. But you have to take the complementary story from the other Gospels. But in a sense, this story is right because the disciples didn't multiply the loaves.

[13 : 12] The miracle didn't happen as the disciples distributed it. The miracle happened as Jesus took it and broke it. Now, I had a most wonderful conversation yesterday.

I'd like to have spent the whole day telling you about the conversation, but just a glimpse with, with, I guess, Hannah Kassis, who's an Anglican Muslim.

That is, he's Anglican, but he was brought up in Gaza in a Muslim country among Muslim people. And, and he, he was very helpful to me in explaining the Muslim faith.

and he's very positive about the Muslim faith and, and their willingness to, on conditions, certain very real conditions, that he feels the Muslims and the Christians have a lot in common.

You know, when we're mostly told that they have nothing, whatever, in common, he feels they have a great deal in common. And, and that, he was very exciting talking about Christian-Muslim relationships to him.

[14 : 32] But, but the thing that, that, that impressed me about what he said was, was simply that, that this, this miracle, which is at the center of this story, you know, that, and I mean, the miracle in the boldest, broadest terms was simply that there were five loaves and two fish and they fed 5,000 people or more and collected 12 baskets of scraps.

Now, that's the mathematics of the miracle, the totally incomprehensible mathematics of the miracle, you know. And, the thing that he told me was that if a Muslim heard that story, they would automatically say, only God can do that.

If you tell our society about that miracle, they would say, can't be done. So, that, you know, I think the Muslims come a little closer than we do in understanding and interpreting the story.

So, that's, that, that is the miracle that is at the center and the distribution, which included the gathering of the 12 baskets, must imply that because there were 12 baskets of scraps left over, that that crowd must have been satisfied.

You know, that's, when you have somebody to dinner and there isn't anything left for a second helping, you know that it may be because they're too polite to ask because they know you haven't got any more and that you're just bluffing when you say, and would you like a second when you don't have anything to give them.

[16 : 26] But here, there was 12 baskets left over and the story went, well, what happened then, and this is recorded specifically in John's gospel and it's there in verse 13, sorry, 14, the very last verse in the passage you have in front of you.

When the people saw the sign which they, which he had done, they said, this is indeed the prophet who was to come into the world. Now, way back in Jewish scriptures in the book of Deuteronomy, they, the promise was that one day there would come a prophet like Moses and when that prophet like Moses came, it would be a sign that the kingdom was come and that's why when people asked Jesus who he was, he said, who do you think, some said, you're one of the prophets, that the line of the prophets is still going on and the prophet we're looking for is you and you see the wonder of this idea is that they thought this must be the one who was going to bring in the kingdom and as a result, as you learn, they took Jesus and wanted to make him king.

Why would they want him to make him king? Because he had answered in this miracle the fundamental human problem.

How do you put bread on the table? He was the one who was able to feed the 5,000 and the whole machinery of our economy is somehow short-circuited by Jesus being able to do this and they took that to be the sign of the kingdom and we do too.

I mean, we still think that must be the kingdom. When everybody is fat and well-fed on the whole of the globe, then the kingdom will have come because the deepest needs of humanity is that their belly shall be full.

[18 : 39] It is a ritual that we observe every day by sitting down piously at the table with knife and fork and serviette in hand and seeking to meet our deepest needs with variations on the breakfast menu, the luncheon menu, and the dinner menu, and the late snack menu if you want.

That feeding our gut is such a human, such a basic human reality that if somebody can do this, then he must be king.

And we, in effect, are prepared to make anybody king who can meet this need. So, that's what they did. They wanted to make him a king and Jesus disappeared into the hills so that they couldn't do it.

Well, there you have, in a sense, the story that is in front of you and I just want to tell you one or two things about it. It is a universal story.

I don't know how anybody who comes from any particular position of belief or philosophy can sidestep this story. It's so fundamental.

[19 : 49] It's a universal story. It describes a universal need for bread. It raises the universal question, how can we meet the human need that we encounter every day?

It demands a universal answer. That is, you can't give theoretical answers to this. You've got to be able to produce an answer that is as good in the highland jungles of Malaysia as it is in Alaska or along the Arctic coast or in the heart of Central America.

Somehow this universal question is in every place and we must somehow recognize that any adequate answer has to be a universal answer to meet a universal need.

Well, what happens, and this was the divisive part of the whole story, what happens is this. The next day Jesus has come across the Sea of Galilee, the crowd walking around the end of the Sea of Galilee catch up on him, and they come to him, and what do they want?

More bread. And Jesus said, no. And that was at the point where they turned away, because they conceived that to be the great human problem, and Jesus had seemed to be able to meet the great human problem, and when they come next day for bread, he says no.

[21 : 18] But he says to them these very poignant words. He said, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, and when he talked to them, these are the words he used.

I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever, and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.

He says that I am the living bread. I am the manna. I am the one whom God has provided. And if you want to meet the deepest human need, then do this.

Take this bread which was given for you. This is my body which was given for you. This is my blood which was shed for you. Drink this in remembrance of me.

That Christ is saying, I alone can meet the human need. And the only way that your need can be met is in participating in Christ.

[22 : 33] He uses the story of having taken the loaves and broken them and distributed them. to compare to his own story of his body being broken on the cross and his blood being shed.

And the benefit of that sacrificial death is to be consumed, as it were, by people in order that the deepest needs of their life might be met through the forgiveness of God which is mediated to them through the cross of Christ.

And that's what he tells them. That's how he takes this story and that's how he ends up. And when he spoke to them that way it says simply that many of his disciples turned away and followed him no more.

They couldn't go along with that. And then you have the wonderful story of Peter coming to him and Jesus looking at Peter and saying will you also go away?

Which undoubtedly meant you are free to. Nobody will stop you. You're free to go away. And Peter said where do you go?

[23 : 50] Who else has the words of eternal life? Who else has that bread? That source of life?

Which bread is? The staff of life. Nobody else has that source of life except you. There is no place else to go. Now I can't tell the story without being aware that people have to be offended by it.

and rightfully offended perhaps. And yet there it is. And that's the answer that has to come from our own hearts to the question that Jesus put to Peter.

Will you also go away? Let me say a prayer. God, thank you for this story which brings us into the company of every living person on earth who senses the deepness of the human problem love and the necessity of a totally radical solution.

And not only that necessity but the futility of any solution that doesn't meet the deepest need. Our God help us to answer that question for ourselves as we confront the person of Jesus Christ and he says, will you also go away?

[25 : 37] Thank you that we have the freedom to answer that. And we are also accountable for the answer we give. Give us grace by your Holy Spirit.

We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.