

Jesus Feeds the 5000 - Part 1

July 29, 2020

The story in this coming Sunday's Gospel reading (Matthew 14: 13-21) is commonly referred to as "Jesus' feeding of the 5000". Apart from the resurrection, this is the only miracle that appears in all four Gospels. This suggests that the story must have made quite an impression on Jesus' first disciples, and also that the Gospel writers believed that this was an important story to convey to Jesus' subsequent followers, including ourselves. Although the story is remarkable in itself, I believe that it has a much wider significance than a feeding miracle.

In Matthew's version of the Gospel, this story occurs immediately after two devastating events: the rejection of Jesus and His message by the people and religious leaders in His hometown of Nazareth; and, the execution of Jesus' cousin John the Baptist by the region's political leader, King Herod.

Following these events, Jesus and the disciples withdrew from Galilee "to a deserted place" (verse 13). The Gospels do not name this place, but Biblical scholars and early Christian tradition suggest that it may have been just outside of Bethsaida, a fishing village on the northeastern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Bethsaida is a Hebrew word meaning "house of hunting" or "house of fishing", indicating that it was likely a fishing village.

The "sea" of Galilee is actually more like a lake, and it is possible to see across it to the other side. It is only eight miles (or thirteen kilometres) across at its widest point, and in this story Jesus did not cross at the centre, instead making just a short crossing at the northern end of the Sea. It is likely that the crowd saw Jesus get into a boat and were able to walk around the northern coast to Bethsaida, which would be just a few miles away, while keeping His boat in sight. This was how they managed to already be on the other side when the boat carrying Jesus and the disciples landed there.

It is also worth noting that verse 21 states that there were 5,000 men present, not including women and children. Assuming that the families following Jesus consisted of a husband, a wife, and two children (some families would have been larger, some would have been smaller, and there would also have been some extended families and some single persons), that would mean that there would actually have been 15,000 - 25,000 people present! That is a staggering number, considering that most villages in that area at that time likely only had a few hundred to a few thousand inhabitants. This then was a very large crowd for that place and time, a very large crowd of people following Jesus, and a very large group of people who needed to be fed!

Biblical scholars interpreting this passage tend to focus on the miracle itself and its meaning. I would like to offer my own interpretation of this passage, which I haven't been able to find in any Bible commentary that I have consulted thus far. I do agree with the more traditional interpretations of this passage; my interpretation is simply another way of looking at this passage, which I believe adds to and enhances the more traditional interpretations. I hope that by

reading what follows, you will come to view this very familiar and important Bible story in a new and interesting light.

The way the story is told in Matthew, a reader or listener of the Gospel might interpret the gathering of the crowd as catching Jesus and the disciples off guard. Verse 14 reads "When he (Jesus) went ashore, he saw a great crowd...", which might suggest that He only saw them once the boat landed. Given the geography of the Sea of Galilee as I described above, I believe that Jesus (or any careful observer) would have seen a crowd of that size off in the distance following Him and would have therefore expected to see them once the boat landed. In the following verse, the disciples were concerned about the lack of food and the rapidly approaching sunset, suggesting that they have found themselves in a logistical nightmare – a large crowd with no food and nightfall approaching. I believe that while the disciples may have been caught off guard, Jesus knew exactly what He was doing and that the entire event was carefully planned.

I don't believe that Jesus was trying to get away from the crowd at all. In verse 14 we read that "he (Jesus) had compassion for them (the crowd) and cured their sick". That should not come as a surprise to us, since we know that Jesus is the son of a loving and caring God. What kind of a God, knowing that His people needed Him, would run away from them and leave them on their own?

In the passage immediately following this story, we read how Jesus was able to calm a storm on the very same Sea of Galilee. If Jesus really wanted to be alone and get away from the crowd, surely He could have commanded a powerful wind to quickly propel his boat to the other side of the Sea ahead of the crowd allowing Him to make a quick getaway? Or perhaps He could have commanded a powerful rainstorm to drive the crowd back? But He didn't do that. In fact, rather than trying to outrun the crowd, I believe that the relatively slow journey by boat served a special purpose: it allowed the crowd an opportunity to catch up with Jesus. Throughout the Bible we are told that God meets us where we are in life (literally and figuratively) and this situation is no different. Jesus meets the crowd where they were – on the other side of the Sea and with their many needs.

I believe that the location of this story was not accidental. Remember that by this point in the Gospel story, Jesus had been preaching and teaching, healing and performing miracles, in towns and villages throughout Galilee and Judea. Some people accepted Jesus and His message, while others (like some of the people of Nazareth and King Herod) rejected Him. Most of the community, religious, and political leaders of the region did not accept Jesus and so He wasn't able to teach in synagogues and other public places. He needed to get away from confines of these traditional settings and be beyond the reach of the leaders of His time. That is why I believe He chose a more isolated location for this miracle.

I believe the specific location which Jesus chose was significant. If the location was indeed near Bethsaida (on the northeastern coast of the Sea of Galilee), it would make sense both geographically and theologically. From a geographic point of view, Bethsaida was not that far

from Capernaum (where Jesus likely embarked on the boat). It would make sense that large crowds could follow Him that relatively short distance of a few miles. By travelling from Capernaum to Bethsaida by boat, Jesus would never have been far from the shore and His boat would always have been within sight of the crowds. It was as if He was encouraging them to make the short journey and follow Him to this destination.

Theologically, the location made sense also. If the purpose of the miracle was to attract followers, then what better place to do it at than Bethsaida, which as I said means "house of fishing". Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus gave Peter and Andrew (two brothers who were fishermen) a very specific promise: "Follow me and I will make you fish for people" (Matthew 4:19). Now they were helping Jesus find new followers at none other than Bethsaida, the "house of fishing"!

In next week's newsletter, I am going to continue exploring this story and the reasons why I believe it is about much more than a feeding miracle. Stay tuned for more...

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