

Grounded in the Gospel
xii. Mounting Opposition
Mark 6:30-56

Mark describes two banquets in chapter six. One was held in a fortress-palace, the other in the rolling hills of Galilee. One led to the death of John the Baptist, the other to the feeding of five thousand. The hosts were poles apart. Herod was prompted by self-serving power, Jesus by compassion and care.

The feeding of the five thousand is recorded in all four gospels, indicative of its importance. It was preceded by the hectic schedule of Jesus and the twelve so much so that they had no chance to eat (v31). Their attempt at rest and respite is thwarted by the crowd (v34). Jesus' response of compassion to "sheep without a shepherd" is hardly sentimental, instead "he began teaching them many things". Mark typically is less concerned about what Jesus taught; the person and presence of Jesus is central to his story. The gospel of God's great acts of salvation is Mark's primary concern. Jesus, in their midst makes all the difference. He saw their hungry faces, the temptations they could not break, past mistakes they could not fix, and he is moved with compassion.

As dusk approaches, Jesus ignores the disciples' request to dismiss the crowd to find food in the surrounding towns and villages. Instead, he places the challenge in the disciples' hands, "You give them something to eat" (v37). They are aghast, "That would take more than half a year's wages!" A young boy's lunch, five small barley loaves and two pickled fish, is found and handed to Jesus, whereupon Jesus "gave thanks and broke the loaves" (v41), presiding over the multitude like a Jewish father over a family meal, his table prayer perhaps common to Judaism, "Praise be to you, O Lord our God, king of the world, who makes bread to come forth from the earth, and who provides for all that you have created." The disciples might not understand what is happening but that didn't stop them from acting on Jesus' instructions. Despite the pitiful resources "they all ate and were satisfied" (v42). In so doing God multiplied even the smallest gift made available to him.

Some explain the feeding of the five thousand not as a true miracle, rather a marvel of sharing on the part of the crowd. Shamed by the lad sharing his meagre lunch they do likewise. Accordingly, salvation becomes morality, reduced to ethics and the inherent goodness of humanity. However, neither the disciples nor the crowd meet the pressing need. It is Jesus alone who does so and he alone is still the answer to the need of humanity.

The response of the crowd is striking; they "intended to come and make Jesus king by force" (John 6:15). Accordingly, Jesus instructs the disciples to leave lest they be infected by the contagious expectations of the crowd. He persuades the people to disperse peacefully, thereby averting a revolutionary groundswell with catastrophic consequences. Thereafter, alone "on a mountainside to pray" (v46) Jesus reaffirms his divine Sonship as a servant rather than a freedom fighter against Rome.

The chapter concludes as it began – the crowd milling around Jesus, the disciples amazed and confused, and through it all Jesus' heart of compassion reaching out in mercy and healing, a timely reminder that supernatural ministry requires more than mere human resources.

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