

## SUSTENANCE AND SHARING

### HOLY COMMUNION, MANNA IN THE WILDERNESS AND THE FEEDING OF THE FIVE THOUSAND

Exodus 16:2-18; Acts 2:38-47; John 6:1-13

Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> March 2011 – 8 a.m. and 10 a.m.

1. In this Lenten series we've been focusing on Holy Communion, and approaching it from the perspective of a meal with many meanings. In the first sermon we saw its foundational links with the Passover meal, and we considered the nature of symbolism and sacrament. Last week, we looked at the connection between Holy Communion and the table fellowship that Jesus shared with those around him. By way of this "ministry through meals" Jesus conveyed a very important message of acceptance and welcome to all. This week I want to explore the connection between Holy Communion, the feeding of the five thousand and the Exodus story of the Israelites in the wilderness.
  
2. The feeding of the five thousand was a significant event in the life of Jesus. It is one of only two miracles that are recorded by all four Gospel writers. This miracle has links with the events of the Exodus story, and also links with Holy Communion, as clearly indicated by St. John in chapter 6 of his Gospel in the dialogue between Jesus and the crowd after he had fed the five thousand. In vv. 30-33 we read, "So they asked him what miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' Jesus said to them, 'I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.'" So here is an explicit link between the feeding of the five thousand and the Exodus story of manna in the wilderness. Then in vv. 49-51 Jesus says to the crowd, "Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which people may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, they will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." Jesus then goes on to talk further about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. Here is a clear link with Holy Communion (drawing on what I shared in the first sermon in this series about understanding such use of language in terms of symbol and sacrament).

This morning I want to explore both these sets of links so that we can gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of Holy Communion. Two principal concepts will emerge from this: sustenance and sharing. Whilst we will be going into greater detail, seek to keep these two concepts in your mind.

3. Lets begin by looking at the links between feeding of the five thousand and the Exodus story, and then consider why these links are important.

There are a number of parallels here.

- i) The first is the context of a large group of people being in the wilderness with no obvious way of feeding them adequately.

- ii) The second parallel is the division of the people into smaller groups. In the Exodus story Moses divided the Israelites in the wilderness into groups of 50 and 100. Here (in St. Mark's account, 6:40) Jesus instructs his disciples to tell the crowd to sit down in groups of 50 and 100.
  - iii) The third parallel is the role of the leaders in appealing on behalf of the people to God. Moses cries out to the Lord. The disciples make their appeal to Jesus.
  - iv) The fourth parallel is the resultant miraculous provision of food which is enough for everyone's need.
4. Why was this connection between the feeding of the five thousand and the Exodus story so significant for the Gospel writers and the early church, and still is important for us today? It is because it underlines the repeated New Testament affirmation that in Jesus, God is accomplishing a new act of rescue and salvation.
- i) In the Old Testament, God's mighty act of rescue brought the Israelites out from slavery in Egypt; in the New Testament, God's mighty act of rescue brings us out from slavery to the forces of sin.
  - ii) In the Old Testament, having rescued the Israelites, God forms them into a people dedicated to his glory. In the New Testament, having achieved salvation for us through Jesus' death and resurrection, God forms us into a people, the Church, dedicated to his praise and glory.
  - iii) In the Old Testament, the Israelites are given the Ten Commandments by Moses as the basis of their life together. In the New Testament we are given the teachings of Jesus as the basis of the life of the church and our personal Christian lifestyles. (Some commentators even point to the symbolic value of the five loaves and two fish – the five loaves representing the Pentateuch, the five books that form the core of the Old Testament law; and the two fish representing the two tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written.)
  - iv) In the Old Testament, God leads the Israelites through the wilderness to the Promised Land; in the New Testament, Jesus leads us through this world to our heavenly home.

In the Old Testament, God's great act of rescue and redemption as recorded in the events of the Exodus and the journey to the Promised Land are foundational to the continuing identity of the Israelites. In the New Testament, God's new act of salvation through Christ's life, death and resurrection, and the establishment of the New Covenant are foundational to our identity as Christians and as the Church.

5. What, then, are the links between the feeding of the five thousand and Holy Communion? There are two important connections:
- i) At the outset I mentioned the explanatory dialogue which we find in John 6 in which, having fed the five thousand, Jesus talks about himself as the bread of heaven, and the importance of being nourished by his body and his blood (vv 51-58) Here St.

John is wanting to make an explicit link between feeding of the five thousand and Holy Communion.

- ii) The second link is found in the fourfold action of Jesus in taking the bread, giving thanks, breaking it and distributing it. This parallels the fourfold action of Jesus at the Last Supper, in the words that are said in the Eucharistic Prayer  
“who on the same night that he was betrayed  
took bread  
and gave you thanks,  
he broke it  
and gave it to his disciples, saying, take, eat...”

By describing Jesus’ action at the feeding of the five thousand in this way, John is deliberately making connections with Last Supper and Holy Communion.

- 6. I have spent some time highlighting the links between the feeding of the five thousand and the Exodus on the one hand, and between the feeding of the five thousand and Holy Communion, on the other hand. Now we can come to the two core concepts that arise from these links.

The first of these is the important message about sustenance. The Israelites would not have made it across the desert in their own strength. They needed God’s help and support. In his generous mercy, God provided what they needed to sustain them along the way.

In the Gospel story, the crowd were in the wilderness, and they were beginning to feel faint from hunger. They needed sustenance, and this was provided by Jesus’ miracle.

So also, we cannot attempt to live the Christian life simply in our own strength. Rather, we need God’s sustenance if we are not to fall by the wayside. There can be times when we are low on spiritual energy. This may be through tiredness, or stress, or a period of doubt. One vital way in which God comes to our aid and sustains us on our journey through “the wilderness of this world” is in the provision of the sacrament of Holy Communion. This gives us the spiritual nourishment we need to continue on our pilgrimage of faith until we reach journey’s end and our heavenly home. We can simply come to worship and be ministered to through the communion service, receiving the sustenance that we need.

- 7. The second core concept is that of sharing with thankful hearts the resources that God gives us.

- i) In the Exodus story with the provision of the manna, notice how there was enough for everyone’s need (but not everyone’s greed). “The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. And when they measured it by the omer, the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little. Each one had gathered just as much as they needed.” (Exodus 16:17-18)
- ii) Notice, also, how the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand began with one boy being prepared to share what he had. This led to everybody having sufficient for their needs, and none was left to go to waste.

iii) It is significant also, that in the account of the Early Church in Acts 2:44-45, the believers not only devoted themselves to the breaking of the bread, they also shared their material goods and possessions so that no one should find themselves in need.

8. Holy Communion is not just in the realms of spiritual abstraction. Rather, it is deeply rooted in the fabric of our everyday lives which we offer to God in our worship. This is brought out clearly in the words at the preparation of the communion table. "Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation: through your goodness we have this bread to set before you, which earth has given and human hands have made. It will become for us the bread of life." The communion bread is indeed a gift of God to us through creation, but men and women have also been involved in its production. In this sense it is an offering not just of nature's abundance, but also of human economy.

What happens next in the communion service is very important. The priest takes the bread, gives thanks for it, breaks it and then shares it. This symbolises the attitude we are to take towards our material possessions. We offer thanks to God for them. Then we are to be prepared to share them as needed, just as the bread is broken so it can be equally shared.

Celebrating Holy Communion brings us into table fellowship with Christians around the world who are also celebrating this sacrament today. We are aware that many of them are less well off than we are. This perspective on Holy Communion with thankfulness for God's provision and an offering of the fruit of our own labours is a reminder to us of the importance of not hoarding but sharing. This is why it is so good that we maintain an active policy of away giving – as can be seen by the noticeboard at the back of church with all the letters of thanks received from the churches and mission agencies that we support being on display.

When I worked with the Hong Kong Christian Council, their overseas aid programme was called the "Five Loaves and Two Fish" programme, and it was a very good example of this sharing of God's gracious provision which is at the heart of the eucharist. In the first few months that I lived in Hong Kong a powerful typhoon was headed for Hong Kong, but at the last moment it veered north east and slammed into the Chinese province of Guangdong, causing a huge amount of damage in rural areas to houses, farms and schools. The "Five Loaves and Two Fish" highlighted the plight of these people in the World Council of Churches circles, and within weeks a substantial amount of relief aid had been channelled our way, and we were able to use it to rebuild schools and homes. I had the privilege of travelling into Guangdong a few weeks later to inspect the rebuilding that was going on and to write up a report for the churches that had so generously donated to this relief effort.

9. So as we celebrate Holy Communion and think of its links with the feeding of the five thousand and the Exodus story of the Israelites receiving manna in the wilderness, let us give thanks for the sustenance and spiritual nourishment we receive through Holy Communion as we travel through this world to our heavenly home. Let us also give thanks for the material possessions we enjoy through God's provision and human economy, and in offering up the fruit of our own labour let us pledge to play our part in an equitable sharing of the resources graciously entrusted to us.