**Feeding four thousand a sign** 26/5/24dkm

Read: Isaiah 6, Mark 8:1-21

Text: Mark 8:1-21

Psalms: 147:1-7, 46:8-11, 95:6-11, 134a

Performers and politicians are often one-day-wonders. They do something great one day but are gone the next, although we recently heard a man still singing on stage at the age of 88yrs. Jesus was no one-day-wonder. He fed five thousand men with five loaves and two fish one day, and some days later fed another four thousand men with seven loaves and a few fish. Matthew and Mark record both these miracles. There are many similarities in the two miracles, but the differences are significant, and Jesus himself refers to two feedings (8:18-20). They are not retelling the same miracle, as some liberal scholars try to tell us.

Jesus had gone up north to Tyre and Sidon with his disciples. He wanted some time alone with them. When Jesus left these northern parts he travelled around to the eastern side of Lake Galilee, to a region called the Decapolis or Ten cities (7:31). This area was much drier and more sparsely populated than the western side of the lake. In this region he healed a man who was deaf and dumb, and many others according (Mat 15:30). Even Gentiles were flocking to see Jesus and listen to him teach about the kingdom of God. Our subheadings are: sign of bread, sign from heaven, sign of leaven.

**1. Sign of bread**

Jesus was known in the region of the Decapolis, especially after he started healing people. The people flocked to him with their sick, but they also came to hear wonderful things about the kingdom of God. Jesus spoke as no other teacher did; he spoke with compassion, words that touched the hearts of lost people. With the crowd of five thousand he similarly had compassion on them and described them as sheep without a shepherd (6:34). How do you think Jesus would describe a crowd of people gathered at the football or a political rally today- or even in some churches! Do we not live in a society of lost souls, of people like sheep without a shepherd? Should we not be telling them of the good shepherd that we, by the grace of God, are following?

The crowd in the Decapolis sat listening to Jesus for three days. Can you imagine! We once had cricket matches that went for five days but today the focus is matches of one day or less. We once listened to sermons that went for an hour or more but now want sermons of ten minutes or less. Some of us spend two hours in church each Lord’s Day, but others not; they struggle to stay for an hour, and even then are distracted by things of the world. Where is the hunger for the word of God today? Again, imagine these people listening to Jesus preach about the kingdom of God for three days! They were so engrossed in listening to Jesus that they did not feel hungry. Jesus was afraid they would faint if he sent them off home; some had come a long way (8:3).

Jesus called his disciples to say he had compassion on this crowd. He was concerned for their physical well-being, as well as their spiritual well-being. He showed this concern through healing the sick, but now it was a concern that they have enough energy to walk home. They needed food to give them the necessary energy. But where would this food come from? They were in an isolated place or wilderness (8:4). We do not read that Jesus specifically told his disciples to give them something to eat, although their response indicates this may have been the case (cf. 6:37). They informed Jesus of the hopeless situation they were in, being out in this deserted place. Purchasing food to feed so many people in such a place was clearly impossible.

As before, Jesus involved his disciples. Was he teaching them that with God nothing is impossible, so with Jesus nothing is impossible? Was he teaching them not to worry about bread for the stomach but about bread for the soul? They saw Jesus healing lots of sick people but still did not understand what Jesus was on about. They had previously witnessed him feeding five thousand men near Bethsaida. But they did not yet realise who Jesus is.

How much food did the disciples have? Just seven loaves and a few small fish (8:5,7). With the feeding of the five thousand it was, of course, five loaves and two small fish. While Matthew records Jesus giving thanks for the bread and fish together, Mark has him giving thanks for the bread first and then the fish. Jesus told the four thousand men, plus women and children, to sit on the ground while he gave thanks for the bread, broke it, and then gave to his disciples to give to the people (8:6). He similarly blessed the few small fish, which were also distributed.

Such was the abundance of God’s provision that there were baskets of leftovers; seven large baskets were gathered by the disciples. The Greek word for ‘basket’ here is different to that used in the previous miracle when twelve ‘baskets’ of leftovers were gathered up; hence the translation ‘large basket’. This is the same word used for the basket used to let Paul down from a window in the wall at Damascus.

Some four thousand men, besides women and children, ate and were completely satisfied (8:9, Mat 15:38). Jesus was now able to send them off without risk of them fainting on the way home. Jesus then departed the region himself, heading back across the lake to a place called Dalmanutha, which Matthew calls Magdala or Magadan (8:10, Mat 15:39); this place is thought to be just south of Gennesaret.

**2. Sign from heaven**

Jesus was back in Galilee, the region he left some weeks before. The Pharisees from Jerusalem were still there, and they still wanted to argue with Jesus (8:11, cf. 7:1). Unlike the people who sat listening to Jesus for three days, these educated men only listened to themselves. They hated Jesus telling them about the kingdom of God, especially when he exposed their hypocrisy. These men were determined to expose Jesus as a false teacher, and, as they were failing in this endeavour, they planned to kill him anyway. They came to Jesus again asking from him a sign from heaven. The request was not genuine because they had no intention of believing in Jesus; they were testing him (8:11).

Unbelief gripped the hearts of the Pharisees, just as it grips the hearts of many today, even people who know the Bible. Knowledge, be it theological or scientific, often hinders belief in the truth. Failure to see the hand or voice of God in creation, as declared in the Bible inhibits belief in the truth. It leads to blindness, foolishness, and depravity (Rom 1:20f). Jesus called the Pharisees who came to test him hypocrites because they could ‘discern the face of the sky’ but not discern ‘the signs of the times’ (Mat 16:3). They were wilfully blind, so any sign given by Jesus would be useless. It remains the same today, and even more so. We have clever men telling us that our planet is going to heat up and burn us to death, but they will not believe the word of God which speaks of the earth burning up in the fervent heat on the Day of the Lord (2Peter 3:10). This day will come like a thief in the night not over a period of decades.

Hearing this demand for a sign from heaven yet again, Jesus ‘sighed deeply in his spirit’ (8:12). Why does this evil and adulterous generation keep seeking after a sign? Jesus refused to give them a sign from heaven because he knew it would not make any difference. They would not believe anyway, so great was their unbelief. It was not a sign they needed; it was a change of heart. And this is what is needed today. Do you need a change of heart?

Unbelief is the biggest problem of our age, even in the church; it was Philip who said to Jesus, ‘Show us the Father’! The Pharisees were the religious leaders of that day. Beware of ‘an evil heart of unbelief in departing for the living God’ (Heb 3:12). Many today are still seeking a sign from heaven, a dream, a vision, or a miraculous healing. Some think a vision is needed in order to convert a Muslim but the Bible says, ‘Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God’ (Rom 10:17). Jesus was actually revealing himself as God through his miraculous signs, but this was not enough for hardened unbelieving hearts like those of the Pharisees. For the Christian it is not a matter of ‘seeing and believing’ but of ‘believing and seeing’. We do not need faith to believe what can be seen with the naked eye!

When the Spirit led Jesus into the desert, he was tempted by Satan to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple ‘if you are the Son of God’ (Mat 4:6). Jesus resisted that temptation, and, with a deep sign and an ‘Amen’, he resisted this same temptation from the Pharisees, knowing it would not lead to faith. Not even the sign of the resurrection lead to belief among the Pharisees.

**3. Sign of leaven**

After feeding the multitude, Jesus sent them away with his blessing. With the Pharisees who came to test him, he simply ‘left them’ (8:13). There was something judicial about this parting; these men were not seeking the truth and nor were they sincere. Jesus got back into the boat with his disciples to head back to the eastern side of the lake.

As they journeyed, Jesus said something which they did not understand. He told them to, ‘Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod’ (8:15, Mat 16:6 has Sadducees rather than Herod; they were in league as more political than religious operators). What was he talking about? Leaven or yeast is what they put in flour when making bread. Was Jesus rebuking them for not packing any bread for this trip across the lake (8:16)? They had no more than one loaf. Here we go again! Jesus was talking about things of the spirit, while his disciples were talking about temporal or worldly things. Had they not just seen Jesus miraculously feed thousands of people? So why should he, or they, be worried about bread for bellies? They were slow learners; what about you?

Jesus rebuked them for a lack of faith; it was not just a lack of understanding but a lack of faith in Jesus. While not hypocrites and hating Jesus like the Pharisees, the disciples still did not see who Jesus is. Their eyes were blind and their ears deaf, deaf like the man Jesus had recently healed (7:35). Having eyes that do not see and ears that do not hear (8:18), reminds us of the prophet Isaiah (Isa 6:9,10). They were also forgetful, especially forgetful of the wonderful things Jesus had done and said. Are you quick to forget the wonderful things the Lord has done for you? Sometimes we start complaining like the Israelites in the desert, and that so soon after the Lord God had delivered them in the crossing of the Red Sea.

Jesus reminded his disciples of how he fed the five thousand with just five loaves, and the four thousand with seven loaves. He especially reminded them of the leftovers that they gathered up; actually, they remembered this when asked (8:19,20). Is there any significance in the different number of baskets gathered up- twelve after feeding the five thousand and now seven after feeding the four thousand? What Jesus points to is the abundance of his provision in both cases, and to the fact that he is able to give more than just physical bread. He wanted his disciples to see beyond the miracle itself to the One who was standing in their midst. Jesus wants you to see beyond the mere physical things in life to spiritual realities and eternal realities.

Jesus is not a mere miracle worker. He is not just your ‘run to’ problem-solver. He is more than this. He is Lord, Lord of heaven and earth. He came to seek and to save the lost, to save you and me from sin and death. Sure, he can heal us and feed us, and give us a long life on this earth, but why would he do this? He wants us to live to glorify his holy name. He wants us to be rejoicing in Jesus no matter what our circumstances. His disciples eventually realised this. After his resurrection and ascension into heaven they went into all the world preaching the gospel.

What is your greatest concern as a Christian? What degree of maturity have you come to in your faith? Should you be more focused on spiritual realties than on physical things like food and clothes? Beware the leaven of the Pharisees, men whose focus was on this world, and their place in this world, rather than on the kingdom of God- the leaven of worldliness, of man-made rules and regulations. Worldliness and unbelief can and do infiltrate the church. Some sections of the church focus on political change rather than spiritual change in the hearts of men and women. Jesus said, ‘Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these other things will be added unto you’ (Mat 6:33). Do you believe him?

Let us not be legalists like the Pharisees, preaching law without love, or be like others today preaching a ‘social gospel’, as valid as ministries like feeding the poor and healing the sick are. Jesus did such ‘social work’, but in doing so signalled the spiritual reality of the kingdom of God and divine judgment.