

Loaves and Fishes - lessons for rural mission

Bible Passage: John 6: 1-15

I often use this Bible passage when working with small rural churches as a Mission Consultant. John is keen that his readers might understand the divine nature of Jesus and this chapter records two miraculous incidents. The one we are looking at is the feeding of 5000 people with five small barley loaves and two small fish. I especially like John's account of this miracle as it provides some insights missed by the other gospel writers.

Mission in response to need

John tells us that it was because of things already seen that the crowd gathers. Other gospels tell us that some were sick and seeking healing. Another account emphasises the teaching ministry that Jesus provided on this occasion. We are also told elsewhere that Jesus was moved with compassion as he saw the crowd as needy.

All gospel accounts record the concern of Jesus that the hungry should be fed. This forces us to think of mission in a more holistic way. We can understand that it was the role of Jesus to teach and to heal, but to provide sufficient food for them all to be fed, would we ever have expected that?

This incident clearly included ministry to the soul, ministry to the body, and down to earth hospitality!

Mission is about God's response to the needs he is concerned about, and then our part in partnership with him.

Inconvenient Mission

We know from other accounts that Jesus and his disciples had come here for a rest. The popularity of Jesus was such that they had found little time to have a break. But then along comes the crowd with their needs and the agenda has to change. Mission can disrupt our plans and at times be inconvenient.

Who me!

It must have been great - most of the time - being one of Jesus' disciples. You would never know what to expect from this man. You might see a blind eye opened, or a lame person walk. You might see water turned to wine, or even someone raised from the dead. But it was not so comfortable when he turned and asked his disciples to take responsibility. John tells us that he turns to Philip for a solution.

Philip's response

We could say that Philip is overwhelmed by the greatness of the need. He answers, "*Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!*" If this was a catering challenge for a conference we would probably respond, "We would need at least £15,000 to feed this lot!" Clearly, Philip realises that when it comes to providing food he is out of his depth. Looking at the size of the mission challenge can paralyse us with fear.

Andrew's response

If Philip was overwhelmed by the greatness of the need, Andrew is underwhelmed by the smallness of provisions on hand. Notice the emphasis on *small* loaves and *small* fish. *"How far will they go among so many?"* Looking at how weak we are and how limited are our resources can also cause us to freeze.

John's extra information

John tells us that when he presented the problem to Philip it was only to test him because *"... he already had in mind what he was going to do"*. How we need to grasp this truth. The one who is Almighty and with whom nothing is impossible is always on the scene when we are called to engage in mission.

Putting what we have into his hands

The needs that day were met because what was available, no matter how small, were put into his hands. We can do no more than put ourselves into his hands. Whatever our weakness, and whatever the limitations, we need to put ourselves into his hands as a conscious act. I wonder what the young lad might have thought when he gave away the little that he had. It would have been natural to hold onto it. Mission always calls us to sacrifice and surrender, and to move out of our comfort zone.

Partnership in Mission

Jesus asks the disciples to get things organised. In other accounts we are told that they were to sit down in groups of fifty. That might be more manageable but not even one group will have a bite each normally from such a small supply. Then once he had given thanks he put what he had into their hands and asked them to feed the others. That would mean sharing with eight or nine groups each. I wonder when anxiety gave way to excitement as the food kept multiplying. They became part of a miracle.

After the event

When all had eaten sufficiently there were twelve baskets of scraps left over. It seems to imply they could even have done more. So often when people start to engage in mission they become amazed what God has done in and through them. As a result faith rises to believe for even greater things.

The response of the crowd, having seen the miracle, is to believe who Jesus really was. Should that work in reverse? If we truly believe who Jesus is, should we expect a miracle?

What do you think Philip, or Andrew, or the young lad who lost his lunch felt after the event?

Mission is about service and not adulation

The response of the crowd is for a political uprising that would put Jesus on the throne. But Jesus has a different agenda and withdraws from the crowd. We need to guard against popularity as a result of any service we might render to others. It's meeting the need that matters,

Barry Osborne 2010.