

## Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> July 2015. Feeding the 5000. Canongate Kirk.

### St John 6: 11

*Then Jesus took the loaves (and) the fish and they had as much as they wanted.*

It is generally reckoned that there are three possible explanations to the miracle of the feeding of the 5000. The first and simplest in a sense is that this really was the kind of miracle for which there is no rational explanation except the power of God at work, that Jesus somehow took the barley bread and the fish that the little boy had presumably brought for his own private picnic, and gave the crowd as much as they wanted. End of story. The second possible explanation is that in feeding the 5000 Jesus was anticipating what would become the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Remember how St John sets this episode in the context of the Jewish calendar: "It was near the time of Passover, the great Jewish festival", he tells us. And it was at the same great Jewish festival of Passover not so very much later that Jesus would share his Last Supper with the disciples, and share just one loaf of bread among them in such a symbolic way. In the familiar words of the Communion liturgy we shall hear again shortly "Jesus took bread, and when he had blessed and given thanks, he broke it and said *Take, eat, this is my body, which is broken for you*". Here and now on a hillside overlooking the sea of Galilee, he needed to share what he had with many more than just his twelve immediate followers, and yet his approach is very similar: "*Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to the people as they sat there*". Perhaps all they got was a morsel, a tiny bit, a taste, and perhaps like generations of Christian followers who have shared ever since in that same sort of sacrament, perhaps it was more than enough.

There is a third, more practical explanation. And for that we need to take into account two little details that might easily be overlooked when considering the passage in its entirety. The first detail is that though Jesus and his disciples had crossed the lake by boat, by far the shortest and quickest way to the other side, the crowds had gone on foot. They would have seen the boat from the shore, watching in which direction Jesus was heading, and they would have set off as fast as they could to catch up with him, and that was a journey of nine miles or so. It would be unlikely, I would think, that they would set out on such a journey without any supplies at all. And equally unlikely that in their hurry to reach Jesus they would want to stop even for a rest never mind a meal. So by the time they got there they would be not only hungry but more than a little weary as well. The second detail is that the barley loaves that the boy carried were typically the food of the poor. The best bread would be made with wheat, but while it was tasty and expensive, barley bread was dry and cheap. You really needed something to eat with it, and that's where the fish come in, the

little fish like sardines, certainly no bigger, that swarmed in the waters of the lake and when pickled became a sort of savoury. As picnics go, not very exciting, but all that people like the little boy could afford, and probably much the same sort of supplies that many in the crowd were carrying that day. But when finally they caught up with Jesus they would be so anxious to listen to him and to learn from him that even in their tired and hungry state they would forget the resources they had brought for the journey there and back. Until that is, the little boy, produced his meagre lunch and surrendered it not just to Jesus but to those around him. And suddenly those who had brought food for themselves with no intention of sharing it with anybody else were prompted to do the same, to share it with those who had nothing. Until they were all full, and taking a basket each the twelve disciples filled them with what was left over. And perhaps in this explanation lies the real miracle of the feeding of the 5000. The miracle that could persuade those who were in all probability selfish now to share what they had with others, those whose first instinct was to keep for themselves suddenly to give away.

Whichever explanation you prefer – the simple miracle, the sacramental foretaste or the practical sharing of resources - the old familiar story of the feeding of the 5000 offers us even today more than just a taste of how Jesus works, wherever his followers gather on a hillside to listen and to learn from him. For it shows us how fully faith in him can satisfy even the hungriest and weariest and emptiest of souls, how those who are wandering and wondering, searching and yearning can find in him a source of fulfilment, *as much as they wanted*. Amen.