

14. What can we learn from a 'miracle'?

INTRODUCTION

This session is designed to explore one of the best-known 'miracle' stories told about Jesus. It is *not* one of Jesus' own teaching parables (i.e. stories he used to illustrate an idea he wanted to get across) but rather a story from the life of Jesus that the Gospel writers chose to record in order to illustrate something important about Jesus himself.

The story is told by all four Gospel writers but with subtle differences between each of the versions. Modern scholars generally agree that the Gospel according to Mark (whoever *actually* wrote this), gives us the first written account of the story, most probably set down for posterity in the early to mid 80s C.E., i.e. 50 years or so after the death of Jesus and ten years or so after the sack of Jerusalem and the beginning of the Jewish Diaspora (dispersal). John's Gospel, however, has the most interesting version, revealing that the loaves and fishes in the story belonged to a boy, and mentioning the disciples Philip and Andrew by name. John says that Andrew was the brother of Simon Peter, possibly indicating that the story came from Simon Peter himself.

The narrative, if not actually taken literally as an example of Jesus of Nazareth demonstrating supernatural power and thereby revealing himself to his audience as the Messiah and Son of God, may be understood in a number of different ways.

It is possible to tease out from it links with some of the broader *Solarity* themes, particularly: 'Learning from the wisdom and compassion of others' and 'Going beyond what is "fair" and being excessively generous'.

The accounts may be taken as a sort of 'midrash'; attempts by the Christian authors to link the story with significant passages from the Jewish scriptures, especially in Isaiah [e.g. Is. 40:11; 58:6-8, 11], which foretell attributes of the promised Messiah – ones which Jewish listeners and readers would recognise and appreciate. The linked passages from Old and New Testaments would be read together at the early Jewish Christian church services, as indeed they often are today.

Scholars generally think that the numbers cited in the story are significant and symbolic. [More on this below.]

BACKGROUND

Before presenting the story to the children you may be interested to delve a little into its background. Otherwise please skip to **ACTIVITY**

The four biblical accounts of the story are to be found here: Mark 6:35-44; Matthew 14:13-22; Luke 9:10-17 and John 6:1-14.

N.B. Accounts of Jesus (also) feeding crowds of 4,000 are to be found in Mark 8:1-10 and Matthew 15:32-39. However, modern scholars tend to interpret these as alternative versions of the Feeding of the 5,000. The key (symbolic) numbers mentioned in the 4,000 version are different: seven loaves and a few fish and seven baskets of left-over scraps as opposed to the five barley loaves and two small fishes and twelve baskets of left-over scraps in the 5,000 version.

SYMBOLISM – How early Christians may have understood the story

Note: You could make use of the following background information to inform the children's responses to the activities at appropriate points.

In the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible), Elisha, the successor of Elijah, was considered to be the greatest of all the prophets. He had apparently multiplied 20 barley loaves to feed 100 people. Elijah had multiplied flour and oil to save a widow and her son from starvation. In the New Testament Jesus multiplies five barley loaves to feed 5,000 – serious one-upmanship here! Jesus is presented as a prophet greater even than the revered Elijah and Elisha.

Barley is the first grain crop to be harvested in spring and the Jewish Feast of Unleavened Bread (or Pesach / Passover) celebrates the first fruits of the barley harvest and reminds Jews of how their people were released from Slavery at the time of Moses. In the Feeding of the 5,000 Jesus apparently performs this miracle as Passover approaches and in the same chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus calls himself, "The Bread of Life".

On the journey to the Promised Land under Moses' leadership 'manna' is provided as vital food (bread) for the travelling Israelites. The symbolic number associated with Moses is five – as in the five Jewish law books of Moses called the Torah. Jesus is presented as transforming the Mosaic Law into something much greater and more (spiritually) nourishing. So, just as Moses brought freedom to his people in the past, so Jesus was being portrayed as the bringer of freedom during his time.

In John's Gospel, Jesus is 'The Bread of Life', implying that he provides the spiritual sustenance that people need. Also, in the letters of Paul, bread is part of the Christian shared meal where Jesus' death is remembered and those who take part 'become one body' because they 'share the same bread' (1 Cor. 10:17). Thus, the miracle of the feeding

of the 5,000 can be seen by Christians to be a sign or symbol of the new life that Jesus proclaims: a good society where there is plenty of food for everyone to share (whether 'Jew, or Greek, slave or free, male or female' – Gal 3:28), everyone has enough and there is some left over.

Fish are also significant in the story. Jesus may have always included fish in his meals, as at his last recorded meal with his Disciples before his arrest and crucifixion. In John's Gospel there is also the story of a 'miraculous' catch of 153 fish; 153 was believed to represent all the nations of the world. Some of Jesus' disciples were fishermen and Jesus is said to have made one of them, Peter, a 'fisher of men', that is someone who would bring others into 'God's kingdom'. The fish became an important symbol for the first Christians, who used the sign of the fish as an indication of where their secret meetings might be held.

The number of baskets of scraps left over is also symbolic. Twelve is the mystical number symbolising the Jewish people: twelve tribes, twelve Patriarchs, and now, for Christians, the twelve Apostles. The followers of Jesus, seeing themselves as the New Israel, gather up the remnants of a feast that will be the celebration of the Messiah's deliverance of God's people – indeed the new (spiritual) food for the journey to God's kingdom.

In Mark's and John's accounts the reference to the need (pointed out to Jesus by the Disciples) to spend 200 silver coins to buy enough food for the crowd is presumably included in the narrative to emphasise how large the crowd apparently was – a single silver coin was the daily wage of a rural worker.

ACTIVITY

Read the story of *The Feeding of the 5,000* from John 6:1-14 – NRSV or NIVUK version. Alternatively, use a Children's Bible such as *The Lion Storyteller Bible* or use one of the numerous animated versions to be found on *YouTube* (or as a PowerPoint online). [**Warning:** Many of these are unashamedly Evangelical and are expecting from their viewers unquestioning acceptance of traditional Christian claims about the nature of Jesus. You are strongly advised to look at these in advance to opt for one, which encourages open questioning.]

Ask the children for their responses to such questions as:

- Do you think that Jesus actually turned five loaves and two fishes into enough food, not only to feed (more than) 5,000 tired and hungry people, but also to have twelve baskets of scraps left over? Why / Why not? [Engage the children in questions about the literal

'truth' of stories and 'hidden (or poetic) truth' in the meaning of stories for whoever is listening.]

- Who was the most generous person in the story, and why? [Some might say Jesus, because of his prayers and blessings, but the strongest case here is for the little boy whose lunch was used to start the feast. Some might put a case for 'God' who, in the story, appears to multiply the available food miraculously.]
- According to the Lion Storyteller Bible version, Jesus taught that 'the most amazing things can happen when you trust (God)'. What were the TWO most important things that made something amazing happen in this story? [Do the children mention the sacrifice of the boy and the actions of Jesus? Note that the original version does not say that the boy gave up his food willingly! We just assume he came forward.]
- What was the storyteller trying to say here (a) about generosity and (b) the power of Jesus? [Point out that some people believe that the boy's sacrifice shamed the rest of the crowd into admitting that they had also brought provisions but had been selfishly reluctant to share them. Others believe that a real miracle happened. Some say that the whole story was an invention intended to demonstrate Jesus' power.]

ACTIVITY

Explain that the Gospel writers each pointed out that Jesus made a big impression on everyone who encountered him. He was what we today would call 'charismatic'. Most people seem to have regarded Jesus as a wise 'Rabbi' (teacher) and many saw him as a powerful healer of the sick. Those closest to him who faithfully followed him on his wanderings around the countryside got to know him very well - not just the twelve disciples he chose as his special companions but in addition an unspecified number of women who looked after the group - and these people were eventually convinced that he was the longed-for and promised deliverer of the Jewish people - the 'Messiah' or King whom the prophets had foretold would be sent by God.

Provide small groups of children with a tick-list of possible lessons Jesus might have been trying to deliver to the crowd (see next page), both when he performed the 'miracle' and when he talked to them. Ask the children to talk in groups and see if they can agree which items to tick. When some finish quickly, ask them to put an asterisk next to the THREE most important ideas for people today.

WHAT JESUS MAY HAVE TAUGHT THE 5,000

Tick the things that your group think Jesus might have taught:

1. It is important to enjoy your food.
2. Remember you are Number One: look after yourself first.
3. A little can go a long way.
4. Love God with all your heart.
5. It is important to follow rules, however silly they may seem.
6. It's easy to love your friends but more challenging to love your enemies.
7. You need to worry about the day ahead.
8. Ignore someone who does you wrong.
9. Do your own thing.
10. No one should go hungry.
11. Develop your talents – you've all got them.
12. Look after one another.
13. If you want to do what God wants, then work for peace.
14. Don't do anything that involves work or travel on a Sunday.
15. Make it your goal to get rich.
16. It is important to be fair and just when dealing with other people.
17. Fight back if any one picks a fight with you.
18. If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, your Father in heaven will also forgive you.
19. Share your possessions and good fortune with others less fortunate.
20. Help your neighbours even when it's inconvenient.
21. If someone does something harmful to you, do something harmful back to them.
22. If you trust God, amazing things can happen.
23. Always put your needs first.
24. Happy are those who are merciful to others.
25. It doesn't matter if you disobey your parents.
26. Always keep strictly to the laws laid down in the books of Moses which forbid you to eat certain foods.
27. Don't ever attract attention to yourself.
28. Don't become angry and bitter if someone hurts you.
29. When you do something kind or helpful for someone else make sure that others notice and see how good you are.
30. Do not store up riches for yourselves here on earth, where moths and rust destroy, and robbers break in and steal.
31. If you criticise the faults you see in others remember to look for your own faults – you're likely to have plenty yourself!

CONCLUSIONS

Get some feedback from the groups and see if there's some consensus over the most important messages. Groups can vote for what they think is the most important item on the list – the one which, if *everyone* followed Jesus' teaching, would help to make our world a happier place for everybody. The groups can then compare notes. Is there an overall 'winning' one amongst the teachings?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Each group could choose a 'good' teaching from the list and prepare a short sketch to illustrate it based on a situation that they have personally experienced. The sketches may be performed in front of the other groups, *who have to guess which teachings are being illustrated*. OR a large group or class can work on a more elaborate playlet illustrating one of Jesus' teachings to perform as part of a school assembly. Good subjects for this include GENEROSITY, FORGIVENESS and SHOWING WISDOM AND COMPASSION.