

## John 6:1-21 - The Feeding of the 5000 - Freedom!

*Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick. Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. The Jewish Passover Festival was near.*

*When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.*

*Philip answered him, "It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"*

*Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"*

*Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.*

*After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.*

*When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them. A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were frightened. But he said to them, "It is I; don't be afraid." Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.*

-----

Here's a good story about a picnic - which you can be reminded of anytime this summer when you throw down a rug, or sit down, and share food around.

And we often present this story as being about a miraculous provision - God's abundance and generosity - overflowing - 12 baskets full. And we sometimes use it to highlight the value of something small, given to God - can be used in mighty ways.

And they're all good things to take from this reading, and there are probably lots of other things the Spirit will say to us from this scripture.

But today I want to offer another layer of meaning, another angle to look at this diamond from.

To the Jews, this story of a religious leader who feeds the people - reminds them of Moses. Moses who led the people out of slavery in Egypt on the night of the passover. John tells us this feeding happened at the time of the passover. Moses who gave the people the law - the 10 commandments, at Mount Sinai - and what does Jesus do - he goes up a mountain and teaches the people - he gives them the new law - love God, love your neighbour. Moses divides the people into 50's and 100's in order to govern them. Jesus too, has them sit down, in Mark's account in 50's and 100's. And he gives them miraculous food - with Moses its Manna, with Jesus its multiplication - but both say that it is from God. And at the end - the people recognise all this, and in Mark's account they try to make him their king - in John it is simply that Jesus must be the Messiah. And John's account ends with Jesus walking on water - which might be a nod to Moses parting the red sea, and that Jesus will lead his people to freedom in a different, even more dramatic way.

Now this leading people from slavery to freedom is a recurring theme in the Bible. Its not just Moses who does it, but it happens again, 1000 years later. When the people have been taken into

exile in Babylon - remember psalm 137 - by the rivers of Babylon, how can sing the lord's song in a strange land.

And this time in exile, like the time in slavery in Egypt, is very important for their journey with God. God gives them comfort through the prophets, like Jeremiah, and Isaiah - here is chapter 51 -

The prophet reminds God, and the people, of what he did in the past -

9

*Awake, awake, arm of the Lord,  
clothe yourself with strength!  
Awake, as in days gone by,  
as in generations of old.*

10

*Was it not you who dried up the sea,  
the waters of the great deep,  
who made a road in the depths of the sea  
so that the redeemed might cross over?*

And then says -

11

*Those the Lord has rescued will return.  
They will enter Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy will crown their heads.  
Gladness and joy will overtake them,  
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.*

This is the way of God - to remind people of what has happened in the past, to give strength and comfort and assurance of what will happen now.

And so in time God leads his people, using Ezra and Nehemiah - out of slavery and helps them return home again to freedom.

Here's the song they wrote when they came home - psalm 126

1

*When the Lord restored the fortunes of[a] Zion,  
(Or Lord brought back the captives to)*

*we were like those who dreamed.[b]  
Psalm 126:1 Or those restored to health)*

2

*Our mouths were filled with laughter,  
our tongues with songs of joy.  
Then it was said among the nations,  
'The Lord has done great things for them.'*

3

*The Lord has done great things for us,  
and we are filled with joy.*

So what the Jews might have made of Jesus, feeding the people, giving them the law - was that he was a new Moses, who was going to lead them out of slavery (to the Romans), and into freedom.

And this is what Jesus is doing - only he's not giving political freedom from the Romans

And he's not bringing freedom to a few thousand people in Israel

Jesus is liberating the whole world, for all time

He is literally making a new path - through death - and inviting us to follow him to the new kingdom.

And this meal - this communion - is not mentioned in John's gospel. In John the last supper is replaced with a long talky bit about the holy spirit and unity. But here, at passover, Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks, breaks it and gives - the 4 things that make the communion distinctive. So this is the meal of the kingdom, the night we remember freedom - the passover - this is everyone invited to share it, everyone sitting down in equal status on the grass. This is the kingdom of God - the freedom that Jesus leads us to.

So - what kind of freedom?

Philosophers talk about two kinds there might be -

Freedom - to act, speak, or think as one wants

Or - the state of not being imprisoned or enslaved

In other words Freedom **to** do this or that

And Freedom **from** this or that

(This was how John Stuart Mill made the distinction between freedom and liberty)

Others define freedom in three ways -

Social - the ability for society to live as it chooses

Morally - the ability to live as one chooses

And psychological or mental - the ability to be free in your thoughts.

I think that's helpful when you think about someone like Nelson Mandela, or Mahatma Gandhi who said - "You can chain me, you can torture me, you can even destroy this body, but you will never imprison my mind."

But the freedom of the kingdom of God - the glorious liberty of the children of God - is something else.

It is the freedom to be the person God created you to be.

Repeat

It is the freedom to be the person God created you to be.

Let me say some more.. there is quite a lot of talk in the new testament about freedom -

Jesus died to set us free,

We are redeemed - bought back from slavery - literally that's what redeemed means.

And in Sign language the words for saved and Redeemed - is the same -

Looks its a sweeping in gesture...

Like someone drawing us in, gathering us home..

Bringing back to the fold..

Like the prodigal son who came to his senses

Literally in Greek - he returned to himself.

He realised who he was...

- wait - I'm a child of that man - and he ran home wanting to work for his father.

You see knowing who you are, what you're called to be and do - that gives you tremendous freedom to make those choices and live with the situation.

If you're in the army, you know where you're supposed to be at 07 hundred hours, you know who to salute to, and who should salute you - there is a huge freedom!

Most of us live in a world with too many choices! We don't know which ice cream to choose, let alone which energy supplier!

So knowing who we are - that is the root to freedom as God's creation.

Jesus has called us to be in this new community, to join in the picnic  
And gives us the identity.

Free to be the people God called us to be

To use our freedom for his purposes, not our selfish ways.

And when the papers talk about Freedom day, and mask wearing

They make it out about our choices, our freedoms

But we Christians should say - I am free to do as God wants - to respect and love my more vulnerable brother and sisters and neighbours. How can I be most loving or supporting to my community - this isn't about what I want or have the right to do - but what God wants.

So let me go bigger, zoom out, to finish.

This is about much more than mask wearing.

Jesus invites us to be part of the Kingdom of God, and to realise who we are meant to be, who we are called to be as Children of God in that kingdom.

We are - St James - we are God's people, in this place, at this time...

He's put each one of us here - to help, encourage, challenge!

That is the freedom that God gives - to be God's people in this place at this time

Some talk about a crisis in the big church - money worries, not enough people coming - how will we cope?

I see the church being the best its ever been - checking on neighbours, giving money for real need, praying like our lives depend on it - reaching out to God, reaching out to others.

This pandemic has not allowed us to be inward looking holy huddles.

It has made us question why and how we do things, and that's a good thing.

It has used all our gifts, each one of us rather than the few.

It has reminded us - like the prodigal - who we are

And we are called home - called out of exile, out of slavery, out of lockdown

Called to be the children of God. The bringers of God's kingdom

And On this feast of St James - we remember who we are,

And we celebrate the freedom that we find when we serve Jesus.