

26 - FEEDING FIVE THOUSAND

Luke 9:11-17

“Who is this man?” Luke tried to answer this question in the next major section of his narrative. (9:11-50). With the crowds reluctant to leave, Jesus put his disciples to an unusual test. Since it was toward evening and time for the main meal of the day, the disciples thought it was time to send the crowd into neighbouring communities to seek food and shelter for the night. Jesus challenged them to feed the multitude themselves. Startled, they replied in a somewhat sarcastic tone. Their supplies were meagre, at best only enough for a very few in a peasant family.

At this point the story moved from homely logic to the symbolic and directed at Luke’s audience rather than the twelve disciples. This was no picnic supper on a hillside in Galilee. Luke intended his Gentile audience in a foreign city to understand it differently than we usually read it.

The number five is the symbol of completeness. In Hebrew scripture there were five books of Moses, five books of Wisdom, five divisions in the book of Psalms. The five loaves represented a similar holy fullness. The two fish also represented the completeness of species such as those identified in story of Noah’s ark (Gen. 6-8). And in the human species too. There would be enough to begin the process of reproduction.

The number ten also symbolizes a perfect number. Five thousand is five times ten, times ten, times ten. But it should not be construed as a actual estimate of the

number present, however that may dismay those who cling to a literal interpretation of Jesus’ miracles.

Jesus’ actions are also symbolic. By blessing, breaking and giving, he foreshadowed the liturgical actions of the Last Supper. By giving them to the twelve he also foreshadowed the reality of Luke’s time when the early church had grown to include many thousands, possibly tens of thousands more. This pointed out to Luke’s audience that many more disciples would be needed. Everyone, all the followers of Jesus, not just the elite, would be enlisted to bring God’s reign of love on earth.

The twelve baskets gathered after the feast was over were probably the small containers fastened to their belts which Jewish people carried so that they had liturgically prepared food available in case of need. One interpretation of the story holds that there was a general sharing of such lunches by everyone in the crowd. However understood, the story is not about a miracle but the prospect of plenty for all. It represented what Sharon Ringe called, “The bounty of God’s reign (that) will suffice for all people, for Jews and Gentiles alike.”

The abundant feast for the five thousand had other meanings as well. That it was important to the early church can be concluded from the existence of six different versions of the event in the four Gospel. Jesus frequently used the symbol of a great banquet to represent either the presence of the kingdom of God or its ultimate fulfilment, as the Last Supper indeed anticipated.