

## Feeding 5000

When you heard the reading from Matthew just now, I wonder how many of you shared my concern at the exclusive metaphorical employment of the image of penal substitutionary atonement! The atonement addresses the question of why it was necessary for Jesus to die. And the answer which is often the only answer given, is that God is angry at human sin, and his anger must be satisfied – so he punishes Jesus in our place. It is one of several images of what happened on the cross – but this image is now one that dominates.

And in recent weeks this issue of an angry God killing Jesus in order to be satisfied, has surfaced in various ways. We have looked at it in Xchange bible studies, Ruth has alluded to it in sermons. I have been confronted by various people, who believe that God must send the majority of the human race to hell, and it's entirely right that he does because they have angered him and his anger needs to be satisfied! Well, it seems to me that the feeding of the five thousand addresses this.

Jesus must have been deeply upset. To the extent that I wonder whether he really noticed the feeding of the five thousand. Think about it. John the Baptist was the one who had baptised Jesus. He was in the same school year. He would have grown up hearing stories about him, aware of the following that his cousin John was amassing. And then he is baptised by John, his cousin. This was the most important baptism in history, performed by the one God had sent to do it. If Jesus really was fully human and fully God, how do you think he would have felt on hearing the news that John had been executed.

This was how the feeding of the five thousand began. Whatever you say, right through this day when Jesus was feeding these hungry people, he must have been mourning deeply over the death of his cousin. Perhaps almost disconnected from the realities in front of him – which is what you would expect if he really was human. If he really was God, then he could not just flick some supernatural switch and turn himself off from the horror of what had happened. He couldn't bury it deep down, or put it to one side, or block it out. I wonder if we try to imagine how Jesus felt while this was going on, it might give something of a clue as to what was really happening here?

Whatever Jesus would have felt, surely he would have felt angry. Angry at the fact that his cousin had done nothing wrong. Angry at a weak leadership that crushes people to keep the peace. Angry that the last of the prophets had been put to death, just like his prophetic ancestors. And surely, if Jesus is angry – it says something of God's anger. And if God is angry at this unjust death, then surely his wrath must be satisfied. Surely Jesus should do something now to start the revolution and see justice come. And surely, if God is angry, God wants to be satisfied, and we need to see revenge. Who will avenge the innocent blood of John the Baptist if not the Son of God, a God of justice!

But Jesus doesn't do this. Now, any decent Messiah would immediately have summoned up the revolutionary militia, delivered a Mel-Gibson William Wallace pre-battle of Bannockburn speech, and march into Zion to seize control of the capital to establish justice and peace. Any decent Messiah would bring in the kingdom by military force. Any decent Messiah would know that the justice of God must be satisfied, and therefore blood must be spilt.

And Jesus doesn't do this. Instead, he simply focuses upon healing and feeding the people of Israel. Perhaps – a just God cannot truly be satisfied, until his people who cry day and night

for justice can be satisfied. And on this occasion, thousands of people went home satisfied. God is not satisfied until his people are. Mourning for his cousin, Jesus must have been cut to his heart, and probably tempted to seek revenge – now would be the time to usher in the Kingdom foretold by his cousin. Now is when the kingdom should come by force. If there were five thousand men present – that would have been enough to do the job!

But what we have here, is an acted parable very similar to the parables of Matthew 14 which we looked at last week. That the kingdom of God does not come with great obvious flashpoint wiz bang explosive events, but secretly, quietly, under the radar of most people's recognition. This is how the Kingdom of God works – and by feeding hungry people in the wilderness, Jesus seems to be echoing deliberately the action of Moses and the people of God in the wilderness, providing miraculous bread from heaven. Jesus is in tune with what God has been doing all along, but it is not what it expected. The people are not sent away empty, but sent away satisfied. It seems that God cannot be satisfied unless people are!

## **Beijing**

This week sees a ritual, religious service that will be hosted world wide. It comes from an atheist state, it celebrates the collective redemption of a people who have suffered severely for a century. At the ceremony, we see the torch that was carried past this very church a couple of months ago, enter into a great stadium, as a moving beacon to peace and unity. These are the marks of the Olympic Spirit so widely celebrated.

I am of course, referring to the Olympic Games ceremony in Beijing. I used to be a big fan of the Olympics, but as a sports fan, I don't think we can be satisfied by any performance, if we knew the hidden horrors that make these games possible. In fact, if you were to google 'olympic injustice' into your computer, then all that seems to come up is – ooh that was a bad decision, I never finished third, I could see chalk dust, that was never a penalty. But the injustice runs far deeper.

In that reading from Matthew Jesus looks out over the crowds and says 'you give them something to eat'. In Beijing, the ceremony and the sports that follow come with the cost of starving people to death in order to entertain us. This is a religious ritual that quietly celebrates suffering.

For instance – I love rowing. And I enjoy watching the rowing. But I cannot watch it this year, because of how the lake on which the rowing will take place was artificially constructed in a city suffering from severe water shortage. The rowing venue, built on a dried-out river bed, is filled with precious water from a fresh water reservoir. Local farmers are not allowed to use water from reservoirs for growing crops – they have been ordered to grow only corn, which requires less water but also fetches a lower price than rice or vegetables. In China, real people are starving and dying so that I can watch professional athletes compete on an artificial lake made out of water that has been stolen from those who depend upon it for their survival.

This says something about substitutionary atonement, about someone's life being sacrificed in order that 'peace and unity' might be celebrated by others. Little people die, so that my desire for entertainment can be satisfied. Of course, there are complex processes involved. Of course, you can't simply make the direct link between my love of rowing and the distended abdomen of a child in southern china. Nevertheless, this morning we dared to pray 'give us this day OUR daily bread. And when we prayed this, we located ourselves alongside these

people in China'. And when we prayed the Lord's Prayer, we located ourselves alongside those disciples of Jesus who looked upon the crowds and heard the challenge of Jesus: 'you give them something to eat.'

And we have a religious ritual this morning, which like the Olympics celebrates the great ideals of unity and peace. But the God that we worship cannot be satisfied, unless the people are satisfied. This bread and this wine, speak of the sacrifice of God himself – that this sacrifice is rooted in meeting basic human need.

The Old testament reading is an invitation to those who are thirsty to come to the waters. To those who are hungry to come and find bread. God is promising to a hungry and thirsty people, that the fortunes of Israel will again be restored. It is an invitation to abundant living. God's heart is to provide basic human need – this is what it means to be blessed. God cannot be satisfied unless his people are satisfied.

And as we celebrate this meal, we adopt something of this character-trait. As we pray the Lord's prayer, as we share bread and wine, we ourselves experience something of this. That we ourselves cannot be satisfied, if people are not satisfied.

Of course, we can't solve all the world's problems. But as we share this meal, we feel the injustice and brokenness of our world. We commit ourselves to worshipping a God of justice in a world of injustice. We celebrate the promise and the presence of God, to remake us, and to remake the world around us.

And here, at this meal – first and foremost we look to Jesus. We look to Jesus.

But also, here at this meal, we like those disciples, re-distribute what he gives to us to the crowds.

Whatever we take into the world, however we may want to change it, whatever we might seek to do – we look to Jesus, we look to Jesus – and what he gives to us, we give to the crowds.