

# Food in the Desert for the Hungry

Thomas Robinson, *Deeper with Jesus*, 9, April 6, 2014

*Matthew 15:29-39* [Cf. Mt 14:13-22 and Mk 8:1-10]

<sup>29</sup> **Jesus** went on from there and walked beside the **Sea of Galilee**. And he went up on the **mountain** and sat down there.

<sup>30</sup> And **great crowds came to him**, bringing with them the **lame**, the **blind**, the **crippled**, the **deaf**, and **many others**, and they **cast them at his feet**, and he healed them, <sup>31</sup> so that the crowd wondered, when **they saw the deaf speaking**, the **crippled healthy**, the **lame walking**, and the **blind seeing**. And they **glorified the God of Israel**.

<sup>32</sup> Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “**I have compassion** on the crowd because **they have been with me now three days** and have **nothing to eat**. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.”

<sup>33</sup> And the disciples said to him, “Where are we to get **enough bread** in such a **wilderness** to feed so great a crowd?”

<sup>34</sup> And Jesus said to them, “How many **loaves** do you have?”

They said, “**Seven**, and a few small **fish**.”

<sup>35</sup> And directing the crowd to **sit down on the ground**, <sup>36</sup> he took the seven loaves and the fish, and having **given thanks** he **broke** them and **gave** them to the disciples, and the disciples **gave** them to the crowds. <sup>37</sup> And they all **ate and were satisfied**.

And they took up **seven baskets** full of the broken pieces left over. <sup>38</sup> Those who ate were **four thousand men, besides women and children**. <sup>39</sup> And after sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan.

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*Exodus 12:37*

<sup>37</sup> And the people of Israel journeyed [from Egypt into the wilderness], about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children.

*Matthew 9:35-36* Cf. 4:23-25; 11:4-6

<sup>35</sup> And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the **gospel of the kingdom** and **healing every disease and every affliction**. <sup>36</sup> When he saw the **crowds**, **he had compassion** for them, because they were **harassed and cast about**, like sheep without a shepherd.

*Isaiah 35:4-6*

<sup>4</sup> Say to those who have an anxious heart, | “Be strong; fear not! | **Behold, your God ...will come and save you.**” | <sup>5</sup> Then the eyes of the **blind** shall be opened, | and the ears of the **deaf** unstopped; |

<sup>6</sup> then shall the **lame** man leap like a deer, | and the tongue of the **mute** sing with joy.

*Isaiah 29:18-19, 23*

<sup>18</sup> In that day the **deaf shall hear** the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the **eyes of the blind shall see**. <sup>19</sup> The meek shall obtain **fresh joy in the LORD**, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel ... <sup>23</sup> they will stand in **awe of the God of Israel**.

*Matthew 13:13-15*

<sup>13</sup> This is why I speak to them in parables, because **seeing they do not see**, and **hearing they do not hear**, nor do they understand. <sup>14</sup> Indeed, in their case **the prophecy of Isaiah** is fulfilled that says:

*‘You will indeed **hear** but never understand,  
and you will indeed **see** but never perceive.*

*lest they should **see** with their eyes  
and **hear** with their ears*

*<sup>15</sup> For this people’s heart has grown dull,  
and with their ears they can barely hear,  
and their eyes they have closed,*

*and understand with their heart  
and turn, and **I would heal them.**’*

[Isaiah 6:9-10]

## Déjà vu, All over Again!

Weren't we just here? Healing crowds, feeding 5,000 (14:13-22)? Why the repetition? Just filler? Why a less impressive miracle? Are the numbers symbolic? Many say it's for Gentiles. But Mt gives no such indication, and Gentile miracles make the Canaanite woman's story strange.

Both Mt and Mk record two separate feedings, but there was no requirement to tell them both. Mt is leading us to understand Jesus through teaching, parable, events. The challenges that faced Jesus' disciples and crowds face every believer. Can you see the world differently? Can you recognize God's kingdom and live in it? Mt knows transformation is always difficult.

The aim is emphasis and further reflection. Do we see? Can we hear? Can we be healed? Mt drives the point home by mentioning both feedings in the next chapter: "Do you not yet perceive?"

## Opening Our Eyes to See the Signs

Mt 16 opens with Pharisees seeking a sign; but all that's happened has been full of signs. That was the problem with the Canaanite woman: Could such a Gentile recognize the meaning of Jesus' healing for Israel's lost sheep? She could! And Jesus praised her surprising faith. A story was unfolding and still is. Israel's story from Abraham to Exodus to Exile to Messiah and Renewal. We are further away than the woman; we struggle to see /hear. Faith is impoverished, distorted.

Mt tries to help us see all that Jesus does in the richness of that story: Notice the number of the crowd, like Israel's exodus into the wilderness. Note the mountain: Sinai; Return to Mt. Zion.

Mt's narrative of the healings echoes Isaiah's prophecies of God's return to his people, the time of renewal, the new deliverance like the Exodus. But more. Jesus sees his people's relationship to God: crippled, blind, and deaf (cf. parables). Jesus' healing the broken also heals the whole crowd so that they see what is happening: In Jesus, God and his kingdom are breaking in, and they praise not the miracle or even Jesus, but God who is fulfilling his promises to Israel.

## Where Do We Get Enough Bread?

Feeding throngs in the wilderness was a striking reenactment of God feeding Israel in the desert, both with the 5,000 and here. Jesus' compassion expresses the God of *hesed* /steadfast love, revealed at Sinai. Three days without food marks desperate need. Jesus desires to help them.

The disciples' response raises questions. Are they just dense? They can't remember the 5,000?! Or do they simply know that a miracle like feeding the 5,000 can't be treated as routine and counted on but is a unique sign of grace. Jesus doesn't practice magic, making evening meals. Jesus doesn't do things to show power or impress, but to signify God fulfilling his promises.

Perhaps they are learning. Jesus teaches through signs. They see where Jesus is going and show that they are beginning to grasp the connections: bread, wilderness, throngs. "We recognize that we have no power in this situation. If we're going to help, the power must come from you." Exodus returns. God is working as before. In Jesus, they watch God give manna to his people.

## Learning Along with the Disciples

Mt takes us with the disciples through the full story. We see the tiny resources compared to the crowd. We watch Jesus bring these things before God in thanksgiving. We watch the paradigm of ministry as Jesus breaks them, gives them to the disciples and they give them to the people. We sense how no one can quite see the moment of the miracle, but Jesus feeds them all, and only satisfaction and abundance remain. Here is God's return, God's kingdom.

Here is the ancient story brought to fulfillment, given new power & focus. Here is our life in Jesus.