



Matthew 14:13–21

13 When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. 14 When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. 15 As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go

to the villages and buy themselves some food.” 16 Jesus replied, “They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.” 17 “We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,” they answered. 18 “Bring them here to me,” he said. 19 And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. 20 They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. 21 The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Reflection

Having been rejected by the people from his very own hometown, and on his return to Capernaum from Nazareth, Jesus is hit with the double blow of John the Baptist's murder. As narrator and compiler of his gospel, Matthew is showing us that opposition is mounting against Jesus. In yesterday's passage, John's killer, Herod Antipas, had heard news of Jesus' ministry. In his guilty conscious and pagan superstition mixed in with his nominal Jewish beliefs, he thought that Jesus might be John the Baptist, come back to from the dead. Perhaps he was thinking he'd have to kill him again. Either way, and ominously, Jesus is on his radar. If Herod had cut off the head of the man who'd insulted his

marriage as dinner entertainment for his guests, what would he do to the man who the Jewish religious leaders would soon be saying wanted to be king in his place?

But I don't want to miss here, political intrigue aside, the human element of what has gone on. John the Baptist was the greatest prophet ever to walk the earth, barely a year in public ministry, and huge crowds from all over the region were cut to the heart by his fearless preaching, repenting of their sins en masse, they were baptised by him in the river Jordan. In this he prepared the way for Jesus and the coming of the kingdom of God, because the only way to enter the kingdom of God is with a repentant heart. John preached for a year, and then spent the last eighteen months of his life in Herod's dun-

geon, wasting away, even at one point doubting his Lord until Jesus sent word to reassure him. John wasted away, that is, until a fourteen year old girl tricked her drunken father into cutting off John's head and delivering it to her on a platter to the roar of approval from his depraved dinner guests. There's a passage in the book of Revelation 6 that I think speaks best to this situation, and a special reward in heaven for John and all those like him:

9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. 10 They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth

and avenge our blood?” 11 Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.

The first verse of our passage today silently speaks volumes. On hearing of John's brutal murder, Jesus sought out a solitary place to mourn him and to pray. But of course this didn't last long, as huge crowds streamed to him from all the towns in the region. And despite himself, and despite the danger, Jesus had compassion on them, healing their sick and no doubt continuing to teach them about the kingdom of God.

How did Herod hear of Jesus? How could you not? Our passage speaks of an extraordinary miracle, fearlessly performed by Jesus only about 15 km's away from Herod Antipas' capital city, Tiberias. It was just 15 kilometres down the coast of the sea of Galilee from Capernaum. How did he hear of Jesus? Well perhaps one of the 5,000 men, which by the way probably meant up to 20,000 people, as women and children weren't included in the figure. Perhaps one of the 20,000 people whom Jesus miraculously fed in our passage today told him. That's a lot of witnesses isn't it? Enough to have this miracle still be told and believed as truth 2,000 years later.

This story is familiar, two fish and five loaves (the size of bread rolls), feeds a multitude, with 12 baskets full of leftovers.

The story is familiar but the implications are less so. This is the big one, the only miracle to be included in all four gospels. You see, many Jews expected the Messiah to appear in the spring at Passover season, when he would repeat the miracle of God feeding the Israelites in the desert, by giving them manna from heaven. Manna was bread that God had fed the entire Israelite nation with during their time of wandering in the desert after he rescued them from Egypt and before he led them to the Promised Land. In today's passage the son of God repeats this miracle, leaving his twelve disciples each with a basket full of bread in their arms, so that hopefully they could make the obvious connection between this bread and the manna, and themselves and the twelve tribes of Israel. It's no wonder that in John's gospel, he

records the crowds right then and there trying to make Jesus king by force.

Think

Take some time now to consider this scene. John's just been murdered and 15 kilometres from Herod's capital Jesus' feeds an army of people with one of his most spectacular miracles in all of the gospels. God himself did this very thing right after saving God's people from slavery to a Pharaoh who was every bit as wicked as King Herod. God then led his people to conquer the Promised Land and make it their own. But now that very Promised Land, is occupied by the Romans. They're enslaved again. And as God's people have been praying for centuries, finally the Messiah is here, the one they thought would come

and rescue them and take their land back by force. As you reread our passage feel the electricity in the air, imagine what it must be like just moments before an uprising, a revolution, when things are on a knife's edge, and could go either way.

Please also consider this great sign. Jesus has power over all the created realm. Imagine what Jesus could have done at any point of his ministry with just a word. Right now he's still holding everything, the very universe itself, into being by his powerful word, but considering that he could do anything, what was the significance of the miracles he did choose to perform? What were they intended to point to? To show? What about today's? That he's the son of God? The Messiah? The greater Moses? The one who's going to lead them

into the eternal promised land of heaven? That he's the bread of life? That whoever comes to him will never be hungry again?

Pray

Then please close our time today by praying. Praise God for martyrs like John the Baptist. This last century has seen more of them than ever before. Pray that God might convict you of ways you can support persecuted Christians and their families, Christians who are fearlessly standing up for the truth, out of love for the lost in their lands. Christians who are as fearless as Jesus was to go and do what he did in today's passage in response to the death of his friend.