



Matthew 16:5–12

5 When they went across the lake, the disciples forgot to take bread. 6 “Be careful,” Jesus said to them. “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” 7 They discussed this among themselves and said, “It is because we didn’t bring any bread.” 8 Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked, “You of little faith, why are you talking among yourselves about having

no bread? 9 Do you still not understand? Don't you remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? 10 Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many basketfuls you gathered? 11 How is it you don't understand that I was not talking to you about bread? But be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees." 12 Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Reflection

(Today's reflection is given by Craig Tubman)

We see now how far Jesus is leaving the teachers of the law behind. He has moved beyond the borders of Israel, he has healed a Canaanite woman and fed 4000 hungry Gentiles (that's a reference to non-Israelites) with seven loaves and a few fish. He is bringing the very fulfilment of one of the earliest biblical promises of God, that through Abraham's line, the curse of sin will be reversed and all peoples from every nation will be blessed.

Jesus has started with Israel but is now extending his power, mercy and the invitation into God's kingdom to people of all nations and backgrounds. Jesus' mission is opening up to show its world encompassing scope. Yet whilst the scope of Jesus' mission is growing and growing, Mat-

they balance this with the Pharisees and Sadducees who are becoming increasingly narrow. They are asking Jesus for a sign, when Jesus has been performing signs, after sign, after sign – even leading Gentiles to praise the God of Israel.

It's a head in the sand moment for the religious leaders. And Jesus refuses to give them the sign that they are asking for. Earlier in chapter 15 Jesus has told his disciples to leave the Pharisees. Today he elaborates on that earlier call.

'Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees.' Be on your guard – don't let any of it get past your defences and into your heart and mind. That's a pretty serious critique of what the religious leaders taught. And then an urging by Jesus to re-

member the feedings.

There was so much going on in the two feedings – more than just compassion and meals. It ties in with expectations that the coming Messiah would feed God's people like Moses did with manna in the desert. And the number of left over baskets also told their own stories. After feeding the 5000 they had twelve basketfuls left over (14:20) and after feeding the 4000 they had seven basketfuls left over (15:37). Twelve is the number representing God's people (the twelve tribes of Israel) and seven is the number representing completeness, God himself.

Jesus is gathering God's people. Jesus is urging his disciples to make sense of the signs, put the pieces together and get ex-

cited. And he warns them that they will not be a part of this people group if they follow the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

But it really is hard to over emphasise how radical and confusing this would have been for the disciples. It was common knowledge that the Pharisees' and Sadducees' role in life was to connect Israel with their God. But Jesus has made it so clear in the past two chapters that not only do they fail at this, they are leading people to hell. The leaven that Jesus warns against is their teaching. And as leaven (whilst small) shapes a whole batch of dough, so the teaching of these religious leaders is shaping, or destroying, a whole nation as they lead them away from the promised Messiah whom they, as a nation, had been

waiting upon for so many years.

Jesus' miracles and teaching have been strongly suggestive, and arguably should have been clear to them, but his disciples don't seem to understand. Their interactions in this account are both surprising and somewhat comforting. Surprising, because after everything they have experienced, they are still so preoccupied with their physical needs that they completely miss Jesus teachings! If nothing else, Jesus has showed them over the past week that he is more than capable of providing for their physical needs (he has fed up to 40,000 people!) but now he wants to let them in on more of the kingdom of God. And here we have the disciples, confused as to whether Jesus is making lunch orders or actually teaching them something

important.

Yet this interaction is also comforting. It shows more clearly than ever that Jesus' disciples were far from spiritual and intellectual superheroes. Their ignorance in this passage is truly embarrassing and yet I wonder whether this is exactly why Matthew includes this discussion? You see, while Jesus has left the teachers of the law behind, he has not left the disciples behind. Why? Because whilst they may be absent minded, slow to learn and clumsy they are still sitting at Jesus' feet and letting him be their teacher and Lord. And as Matthew recorded in chapter 12, a bruised wick Jesus will not break, a smouldering flame he will not put out.

The ones who think they know it all are be-

ing left behind. The ones who can't quite make tops or tails of things are being welcomed into the kingdom. Why? Because God's kingdom has nothing to do with personal capacity but rather the capacity of the one in whom you put your trust. The religious leaders put their trust in themselves. The disciples put their trust in Jesus. That was the difference.

I met a guy some years ago who knew a lot about the Bible. But the dynamic of our very first conversation was somewhat strange. I had been working in ministry for a few years and he knew I had finished my four years of study at Bible College a couple of years earlier. Yet as our conversation moved forward it was clear that this guy wanted to show that he knew more than me. That he had read more widely

than me and could quote more theologians than I could. At the time I didn't really care, I just found it an odd and fairly uninspiring conversation. But several years later I had heard that this guy wasn't treating people in his life very well and was living a life quite distant from God. It really saddened me but strangely it didn't surprise me.

Jesus had given up on the religious leaders because the arrogance in their hearts had made it impossible for them to be open to the work of God himself. Jesus was patient with the disciples because whilst clumsy, they were still willing to admit they didn't know everything and they had the humility to be shaped, ever so slowly, by God's Word. In his Son Jesus, the Father was drawing a new people to himself. And through the work of his Spirit in this world,

he is still doing it.

Think & Pray

Take some time today to think about your stance towards God. It is so easy for our hearts to slip into arrogance. To think that we know all there is to know about Christian faith or Jesus or life and we can become incredibly cold and disconnected from God and the people around us.

Take some time today to think about areas of your life in which you need God's guidance, word and directing. Consider areas of your life that you have closed off from God's word, thinking you know better and confess them to God in repentance. If you are in a place of faith that seems rocky or uncertain, know that Jesus will not break

a bruised reed or put out a smouldering light. He is gentle with you, he is patient with you and perhaps your rocky season of faith is in fact exactly what he needs to show you that he can be trusted in his goodness, patience and love.

Spend some time in prayer today bringing all these reflections to God in prayer.