

Bible Readings

Nehemiah 9:15-20

¹⁵ You gave them bread from heaven for their hunger and brought water for them out of the rock for their thirst, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you had sworn to give them.

¹⁶ “But they and our fathers acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments. ¹⁷ They refused to obey and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them, but they stiffened their neck and appointed a leader to return to their slavery in Egypt. But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and did not forsake them. ¹⁸ Even when they had made for themselves a golden calf and said, ‘This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt,’ and had committed great blasphemies, ¹⁹ you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which they should go. ²⁰ You gave your good Spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manna from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst.

Matthew 14:13-21

¹³ Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns.

¹⁴ When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick. ¹⁵ Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” ¹⁶ But Jesus said, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” ¹⁷ They said to him, “We have only five loaves here and two fish.” ¹⁸ And he said, “Bring them here to me.” ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Sermon

You give them something to eat...

When you travel by plane, you have no other option than to trust the pilot. Entrusting oneself completely to someone else, when that is the only thing one can do, is one thing.

If we can help it, we choose not to do so. We want to stay in control, which is the case when we drive our car. When we drive our car and have your sat nav on, we can choose the extent to which we let its voice guide us to our destination. For there is room for disagreement with the voice that gives you directions, while the driver stays in charge.

When you believe that it is God who guides you in life, something happens to the seriousness and depth of the question: to what extent are we prepared to listen to Him and let Him be the Guide?

Our Old Testament passage takes us to the earliest navigation system: the pillar of cloud that went before the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness.

Israel did not listen to God. They disagreed and made their disagreements known by complaining; by disobeying Him. All this happened within His patience.

When we disagree and make our disagreements known by complaining; by disobeying Him, all that happens within His patience.

Listening requires effort.

It is very easy to hear the words of Scripture without truly listening to them. They can be oppressed, silenced, stifled by what we bring to them. But by allowing Scripture to speak and to be heard, hearers allow themselves to be drawn into something bigger.

What can be gained from listening to our New Testament reading?

After all, it is a story with which most of you are familiar. Learned at Sunday school. The feeding of the five thousand, often mentioned or referred to, in our daily lives.

The story is preceded by the rejection of Jesus by the people of Nazareth and the beheading of John the Baptist. Hearing about the death of John, Jesus would have been deeply affected. Grieving, He wants to withdraw....

But the people don't want to let him go and manage to get to the place, where Jesus thought He would have quiet time, before He got there. So, there they are, waiting for Him.

And when He saw them He had *compassion*...

This compassion makes that He resumes to heal the sick, but when evening falls, the disciples urge Him to send them away to get food. What they actually mean is, "send them away so that we can look after ourselves".

To their surprise, or probably more accurately, to their shock Jesus says.....'you feed them'.

They respond to Jesus in terms of what they see; what they have: they have only five loaves and two fish, so it's pretty clear that the responsibility that Jesus gives them to feed the crowd, is not realistic.

Mission impossible.

Then Jesus tells them to bring those loaves and fish to Him.

Now, this is a story that is included in all four gospels and what they all share is that Jesus acts as a Jewish host. Taking the bread and fish, he looks up to heaven and blesses; he breaks the bread, then gives it to the disciples and they give it to the people.

Blessing, breaking and giving.

The acts of an ordinary Jewish father, as preparation for the meal he and his family have, in their daily lives.

And it is these acts of Jesus, the blessing and the breaking of the bread for the five thousand, that gives the meal its true meaning,

Many will come from the east and the west and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 8:11)

In this particular way; the Jewish way of blessing and breaking the bread, Jesus unlocks the door to the Kingdom of God as it is present *within Him*: the Kingdom where there is room for everyone; where there is enough for everyone.

Whatever the differences are between these people who are sitting on the grass, they have one thing in common: they are there because they choose to be in Jesus' presence.

When you choose to be in God's presence, He makes Himself known to you, in His own mysterious way.

Jesus, as their shepherd, gives them food. Food to all of them, without making any distinctions.

All were satisfied. Just like the people of Israel were satisfied in the desert, when they received the manna from heaven.

It is as if in this moment; in this story of the feeding the five thousand by Jesus, we find the fulfilment of the words of Ezechiel:

¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will

strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice. (Ezekiel 34:14-16)

And so, listening carefully to this so well-known story, by letting it speak from within its own Jewish mind set, you and I can receive a glimpse of the Kingdom of God.

God's blessing creates room:

The words "to bless" and "to create", sound in English very different but in Hebrew they sound similar: "barach" means to bless; "baruch", blessed; while "barah", means to create.

"In the beginning God created the world", With these words the first bible book starts. When God blesses, God creates space; room for the other.

When Jesus feeds the five thousand, He struggles Himself. Remember He wanted to withdraw; have some space for Himself because He felt grief: first the rejection at Nazareth, then the news about John the Baptist, that and how He was killed.

Yet, in the midst of His own emotions, Jesus feels compassion for the crowd. He heals the sick and feeds them.

He looks up to heaven,

I lift up my eyes to the hills.

From where does my help come?

*² My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth. (Psalm 121:1)*

and blesses.

All were satisfied, twelve baskets full of pieces of bread were left.

Twelve....? Is that particular number just picked by Matthew or is it to be heard within the context of the Jewish faith? It seems hardly possible to think that Matthew does not silently refers to the whole of Israel: to the twelve tribes that can be fed with those twelve baskets.

Our Lord Jesus came from within Israel. Israel who was blessed with the blessing with which Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were blessed.

It is the same blessing you are blessed with,

The Lord bless you and keep you;

the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;

the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

Amen