

Sermon – 5th August 2018 “You’re missing the point!”

John Boylan Reading: John 6. 24-35

In the days when the sun never set on the British Empire, the Foreign Office posted Miles Cavendish in Khartoum, Libya. The colonial government had decorated the central square of the city with a dramatic equestrian statue of General Charles George Gordon. Gordon had died heroically in 1885 when Khartoum fell to the troops of the Mahdi after a ten-month siege. Converted into stone, Gordon now forever would survey the city from the back of his spirited horse.

Cavendish had one son. The boy was named Charles – after General Gordon, of course. Cavendish was a dedicated British civil servant. His heart swelled with the spirit of imperial obligation and pride. He made it his business to impress on his son, the importance of the statue. “That is Gordon” he said to his son and bowed his own head in a moment of reverent silence.

The boy loved the statue and virtually every day he would run to the square to take a look at Gordon. When the Foreign Office informed the elder Cavendish that he was being transferred from Khartoum to Lahore, the boy’s last deed before leaving was to proceed to the square to say a solemn farewell to Gordon. As Miles watched, his eyes welled up with tears. He said to himself, “Indeed, here beats the heart of a true Englishman. The lad is well named indeed!”

On board the steamer to Lahore, the boy turned to his father thoughtfully and said “Father, I have a question I always wanted to ask.” “Yes, my son?” said Miles. “Well, it concerns Gordon. There is one thing I do not understand.” Puzzled, Miles asked “What is it, my son?”. The boy paused before answering, “Tell Me, who is that silly looking man who sits on Gordon?”

Misunderstanding! When was the last time you said or thought the words “No, you’re missing the point!” Sometimes no matter how hard you try to explain something; the other person just doesn’t get it. It’s very frustrating for both parties but of course, the person giving the information already has the background detail whereas the receiver may not have that advantage. So, a good teacher doesn’t just tell but builds up and explains the topic and then checks for understanding.

Well, today’s gospel reading is all about misunderstanding. It should really be read in the context of the whole chapter, but the Lectionary has chosen to split the chapter over four weeks. We started last week with the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus walking on water and through the next two weeks we will continue the ‘bread of Life’ theme. **So, I won’t stray into David and Colin’s sermon text even though they will both inform today’s reading. But there is still a message we can take from today’s extract. I said earlier that it was about misunderstanding. Well actually it is several misunderstandings.**

But let’s just step back to last week’s feeding of the 5000. I’m sure that at some point we’ve all been in a large crowd and if nothing else remember the noise generated. To assume that all 5000 were focussed on Jesus is unlikely. Some would be distracted, some wouldn’t be able to see, some wouldn’t be able to hear. The logistics are not good for a spontaneous open-air meeting. And of course, there was also the danger in gathering in such a large crowd that the authorities may choose to see it as a protest or an uprising and they were not normally slow to react with force and then ask questions. John’s explanation that it was Passover and the influx of pilgrims may have given them some leeway, but such a gathering

was still unusual. From John's description, it does sound like a bit of a circus;" a large crowd followed him because they saw the signs he was doing in healing the sick" (John 6.2). I suspect that not all 5000 were witnesses to Jesus' healing miracles. There were no newspapers or social media to spread the news of Jesus, it was down to word of mouth. We all know the apocryphal story of the WW1 General sending the message down the line requesting reinforcements because he was going to advance with the message ending up as 'send me 3s and 4d because I'm going to a dance'. So, what was it that the crowd expected. Some undoubtedly, expected a King, some a prophet, which of course would add a dangerous mood to the meeting. But I suspect that most of the people there didn't really know what to expect and followed because everyone else did. Crowds gather when they see other crowds.

And that confusion is supported by their actions in today's reading. It's not immediately clear from John's story whether the crowd actually heard Jesus' message? And those that did hear it, did they fail to understand it, or did it just go in one ear and out the other as soon as the food was passed around? From their subsequent actions it would appear that it was the latter.

Certainly, feeding the 5000 was a miracle or sign as John calls it. I wonder how many people in the crowd actually realised what Jesus had done. Like all Jesus' miracles it was low key. No fanfares or roll of drums and definitely not done to demonstrate his divine power or authority; none of his miracles were. They seem to be either triggered by a genuine plea for help, for example, the water into wine, or the raising of the dead girl, or more importantly, a reaction to a genuine display of faith in him as God; the woman with the haemorrhage touching his cloak, the blind man calling out to the Son of David, the Centurion's request to heal his servant. Jesus was never provoked into using his power for himself (maybe Lazarus is the exception, but we can debate that another time).

We've heard the saying that "Faith can move mountains" and it's certainly interesting to consider whether an individual's total faith in Jesus can cause a miracle to occur. Remember Jesus tasked the disciples to heal the sick in his name and that should apply to all followers of Christ. Faith is the key. If you recall, in my last sermon I talked about Mark 6.5 where he described Jesus' reaction to the hostile reception and lack of faith in him in his home town "he could not perform any miracles there".

It would be unfair to say that when the crowd follow Jesus around the lake, he was faced with a lack of faith, but John certainly leads us to believe that they seemingly failed to understand or focus on anything other than the free meal. But John uses the subsequent sequence of misunderstandings as a literary device to allow Jesus the opportunity to outline what is important in his message. Consider the events. First the crowd want to know how Jesus got around the lake so quickly – Jesus accuses them of just wanting another meal. Then they ask what kind of work they should do to please God – Jesus replies that they don't need to work, just believe in the one God has sent. The people then ask for a sign like Moses and the Manna from Heaven – which suggests that many did not realise that it was Jesus who had fed them all only hours previously. Jesus corrects them in thinking that Moses supplied the manna, explaining that it was God who provided for his people. Finally, they ask, almost demand this 'bread' but Jesus confuses them by saying that he is the bread. Total misunderstanding and at cross purposes from start to finish.

The symbolism of bread should have been clear to the crowd, yet they focussed on the physical food. Bread was an essential part of life and the word became a generic for any form of food. Rituals, social

bonding all involved 'bread'. It even figured in place names. Incidentally, whilst preparing this talk I discovered that Bethlehem in Hebrew is two words Beth and Lehem. Beth means house and Lehem means bread. So, Bethlehem means 'House of Bread'.

So, give the confusion why is the passage included in the gospel and what is the message. Well as I said, John places this story at Passover and there is certainly a parallel in the crowd following Jesus and the Exodus story; God liberating his people and leading them to the promised land. The crowd even inadvertently pick up on the symbolism by asking Jesus for a sign like Moses providing Manna to enable the tribes to be fed. But as Jesus pointed out it was not Moses that supplied the manna but God. But like the original tribes, their continued focus on physical food has made them miss the real significance of the manna. God was not just feeding them; he was showing that he would always look after them if they only had faith in Him. Deuteronomy 8.3 refers to God's actions: "He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." But the crowd do not make the link between food and God looking after them and therefore struggle with the parallel that Jesus is presenting to them.

And that is the key point Jesus is trying to establish; believe and trust in God/Jesus and he will provide. Now, of course that's easy to say but not so easy to do. Remember Matthews story of Jesus asking Peter to walk on the water to him. (Matthew 14:22-33) Whilst Peter was enthused and trusting he did it but when the first little doubt about the reality of what he was doing entered his mind he started to sink. It's a good lesson and I'd be the first to go under.

So, there are messages in even the seemingly pointless stories, even the misunderstandings. Nothing is included without a reason.

So, what is it that we are looking for? If we choose to take the superficial meaning of Jesus' words and actions, we start to look for what he can do for us – bread on demand. Jesus' actions and words are signs and signs are meant to give direction. In this case the destination is the true food that the son of man will give, the food which is Jesus himself (John 6.35), the true bread of Heaven. But first we need to see the signs and then follow them, not the crowd.

Amen