**Address for Eucharist at the Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fish, Tabgha**

The story of Jesus feeding the five thousand is certainly one of the most famous in the New Testament. Unusually, it is recorded in all four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and here in Tabgha we will see the mosaic floor with the basket of five loaves and two fishes that has been reproduced and memorialised millions of times. The story carries strong simple message: here is a Lord who cares about his people’s needs: ‘he saw a great crowd and he had compassion for them’. And he he provides for those needs with this amazing meal for five thousand, men, as Matthew says in an aside that has not been universally popular ‘besides women and children’. So if for every man there is a woman and two children, let’s say twenty thousand in total.

For early Christians trying to understand this extraordinary event, there would have been some further resonances that you might have picked up: resonances that stretch from the distant past into the future. I’d like briefly to outline five of these.

First of all, looking back to the far past, the book of Exodus recounts that foundational moment when after their journey out of Egypt, God gave manna – a bread-like substance – to the people of Israel as they travelled through the desert. In what seems to be a conscious echo of that, Matthew points out in today’s gospel reading that the site of the feeding of the five thousand was also a ‘deserted place’. ‘I am going to rain down bread from heaven for you’ says the Lord to Moses in that seminal story. Here then is Jesus – a new Moses – feeding his people with the new manna from above.

If those present could cast their minds back to Moses, they might also have thought perhaps six or seven hundred years after him about the prophet Elisha in the second book of Kings. Here we can read about a famine in the land of Gilgal, near Jerusalem during which Elisha used twenty barley loaves to feed one hundred people and, similar to the feeding of the five thousand, there are plenty of left-overs: ‘(Elisha) set it before them, they ate, and had some left’ (2 Kings 4.44). The difference however is also striking: five loaves to feed twenty thousand is a feat of a far greater magnitude than twenty loaves to feed one hundred and the obvious message is that something greater than Elisha is here.

Thirdly, let’s move forward a few more hundred years to the time right before this story occurs in Matthew’s gospel. One of the original readers, or more accurately hearers of St Matthew’s gospel would have noted a stark contrast between the story of the feeding of the five thousand and a very different meal that is served up just before it in Matthew’s narrative. At the start of the chapter fourteen, Matthew recounts how John the Baptist has irritated King Herod by telling him that he should not be married to his wife Herodias because she had previously been married to Herod’s brother Philip. Herodias’s daughter – who came subsequently to be known as Salome – pleases Herod so much by her dance that he promises to give her anything she asks for and she requests the head of John the Baptist. Matthew recounts that ‘The head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, who brought it to her mother’. The memory of this awful and grisly meal in a royal palace forms the backdrop to the wonderful and wholesome meal on a deserted hillside.

Fourthly, the feeding of the five thousand not only casts our minds backwards, but also seems to prefigure future events. At the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus carries out what has been described as a ‘four-fold action’. We hear that he *took* the bread, then, looking up to heaven, he *blessed* it. He *broke* it and then he *distributed* it, he gave it out, to those who are in the crowd. These actions point forwards towards the Last Supper and the institution of the Eucharist when Jesus would repeat them with the bread and wine: which, again, he takes, blesses, breaks and distributes. There’s a significant detail: in our gospel reading today, St Matthew says that Jesus told people to sit on the grass but Mark in his gospel puts it more explicitly: he says that Jesus ordered people to sit on the *green* grass. In all probability it’s not just a throwaway remark: the grass would have been green in the spring and spring is the season of the Passover. So the feeding of the five thousand not only looks back to the origins of the Jewish people with Moses and Elisha, but also points forward to the meal at Passover time that Jesus would share with his disciples: the Last Supper and the events that would take place when the Lord himself passed over from death to life.

And finally, as people moved their minds further forward still, this story would have summoned up another hope: the hope for the Kingdom or reign of God. This is the future hope predicted by the prophet, such as Isaiah who characteristically uses the language of a wonderful feast at which all are satisfied to depict the life of God’s Kingdom. This is the future hope that Mary predicts in her Magnificat when the Lord will fill not just five thousand, not just twenty thousand but all who are hungry with good things.