

Matthew 15:29-16:12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 06 March 2020

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[0 : 00] Matthew chapter 15 verse 29 to chapter 16 verse 12. And they glorified the God of Israel.

Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said, I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat. And I am unwilling to send them away hungry, lest they faint on the way.

And the disciples said to him, Where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd? And Jesus said to them, How many loaves do you have?

They said seven and a few small fish. And directing the crowd to sit down on the ground, he took the seven loaves and the fish. And having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples.

And the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over. Those who ate were four thousand men besides women and children.

[1 : 26] And after sending away the crowds, he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadan. And the Pharisees and the Sadducees came. And to test him, they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.

He answered them, When it is evening, you say, It will be fair weather, for the sky is red. And in the morning it will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.

You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky. But you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign.

But no sign will be given to it, except the sign of Jonah. So he left them and departed. When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread.

Jesus said to them, Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, We brought no bread. But Jesus, aware of this, said, O you of little faith, Why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread?

[2 : 32] Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered?

How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread.

But of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. The concluding half of Matthew chapter 15 begins with Jesus performing a series of healings on a single occasion.

He goes up on a mountain, a site which could be chosen for orientation to God. It's where you would go to have communion with God, to pray or something else. And he sits down and people come to him and bring him people for healing.

The outcome of the event is that people glorify God. This is the heart of the purpose of the healings. Very often when we're reading through the Gospels, we can think that with the conflicts with the religious leaders, that what really matters about the signs is establishing credentials, and authority, and a demonstration of power.

[3 : 43] But that's not the main thing at all. It's about God coming near to his people, and his people drawing near to him. And that's exactly what we see in this particular incident. This event provides the context for a miraculous provision of food to the crowd.

Having healed and taught the people and led them to glorify God, Jesus does not want to send them away hungry. And in an event reminiscent of the earlier feeding of the 5,000, Jesus repeats the pattern of the Lord's Supper.

In verse 36, He took the seven loaves and the fish, and having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

Already in reference to the feeding of the 5,000, I noted the way that this is representing a church scene, in part. The disciples are receiving the bread from Christ, the bread that makes us think of the institution of the Lord's Supper later on, and they are passing it on to the people, the people that are being gathered around and under their leadership.

This is preparing us for the later ministry of the church, under the teaching and the guidance and the rule of the apostles. This seems to occur in a largely Gentile region, particularly emphasised in the book of Mark.

[5 : 00] And it's suggested in part also by the coming of the Canaanite woman to Christ. Jesus is feeding not only Jews, but presumably many Gentiles too. And we must now think back to the conversation with the Canaanite woman.

Gentile God-fearers are feasting with the lost sheep. And so the dogs that many would dismiss are now eating at the same table with the Jews.

There are 5,000 in the earlier account, connected with Israel's military ordering, the 50s that they were divided into, and 12 baskets are gathered up afterwards.

They're fed with five loaves and two fish. Here we have 4,000, maybe connected with the four corners of the earth, and there are seven baskets gathered up.

The word for basket is different. The feeding of the 5,000 is the primary act and miracle. But the Gentiles are also blessed with the Jews. There are leftovers, leftovers for others.

[6 : 01] There's a super abundance, more than enough for others beside Israel. Five loaves, seven loaves, makes 12 loaves altogether. Israel was represented by 12 loaves of the showbread.

And maybe we're supposed to see a new Israel, a new people of God being formed here. There are 12 baskets, then there are seven baskets. The 12 baskets are connected maybe with the 12 disciples, also with the symbolism of Israel more generally.

This is the establishment of a new Israel around the meal table of the Messiah who provides for his people in the wilderness. After this, the Pharisees and the Sadducees come together to test Jesus. It's interesting, these were rival sects within Judaism. And yet they're united in their opposition to Jesus. Suddenly they find that they're friends in this particular endeavor.

They both oppose and resist Jesus. And so they can come at him together, even though they're coming from different sides. Nothing brings enemies together like a greater enemy.

[7 : 06] They ask for a sign, but Jesus has already given them more signs than they would know what to do with. You can maybe think back to Isaiah chapter 29, verse 13 that he referenced earlier.

The Lord said, Because this people draw near with their mouth and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men. He goes on, Therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder, and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.

That's exactly what's happening here. They're asking for signs, but they've been given a multitude of signs and just not seen them. They're being bamboozled by Christ. Their wonders are just leaving them befuddled.

They may be able to read the weather from the sky, but they can't read the signs given from heaven in the events of their own day. Jesus describes them as an evil and adulterous generation.

This harkens back to the words of Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 32, verses 5 and 20. They have dealt corruptly with him. They are no longer his children, because they are blemished.

[8 : 15] They are a crooked and twisted generation. And again, And he said, I will hide my face from them. I will see what their end will be, for they are a perverse generation, children in whom is no faithfulness.

And he proceeds, They have made me jealous with what is no God. They have provoked me to anger with their idols. So I will make them jealous with those who are no people.

I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation. For a fire is kindled by my anger, and it burns to the depths of Sheol, devours the earth in its increase, and sets on fire the foundations of the

mountains.

They will be given no sign, save the sign of Jonah. Just as Deuteronomy chapter 32 warns, God made Jonah and the people of his day jealous by those who are not a people, people who are not called by his name.

God sent his word not to part of the nation of Israel, but to the Assyrians and to Nineveh. And as he did that, he showed grace to people who are not a people, and brought to jealousy his own people.

[9 : 21] This is the same thing that Christ threatens here, in part. The sign of Jonah will be seen as the gospel goes out to a different people, and they will be provoked to jealousy.

Jesus warns about the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, which his disciples don't understand. But the point is that teaching is like leaven, which when hidden in hearts, produces loaves of a particular character.

Jesus is forming a new set of people as loaves, cutting off the old leaven of the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, but introducing the new leaven of his words and his spirit.

Now, we need to recognise that leaven is not the same thing as yeast. Leaven is part of the dough of the old bread that is taken and put into the new bread to cause it to rise in a sort of sourdough form.

And that continuing tradition is one part of the bread being passed on to another. It's generations of bread. And that generational character is like a tradition. And the point of cutting off leaven is to cut off the tradition, to break with the past, to make this cut with the former pattern of life.

[10 : 35] Leaven, then, is passed on as a tradition from loaf to loaf, and the disciples need to make a clean break with the Egyptian loaves of the scribes and the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

Jesus challenges them to pay attention to the miracles that had just occurred and the numbers associated with it. We may find this very difficult to understand. The numerology of such events just seems opaque to us.

But Jesus clearly wanted his disciples to see meaning in those events. Those events were signs.

They weren't just great works of power. They were great works of meaning as well.

Five loaves for 5,000. Seven loaves, but only 4,000 fed. Some have suggested that this might be an anticipation of the feeding of 3,000 at the day of Pentecost.

Seven loaves should feed 7,000, but there's 3,000 left over. And maybe that's an anticipation. I'm not sure. I'm less convinced by that, but it's a possibility some have raised.

[11 : 36] Jesus' teaching concerning leaven and loaves and these other themes can draw our mind back also to the teaching of the parables in chapter 13, where many of these themes are also present.

Jesus is teaching in a way that challenges us to recognize the tradition and the way that it forms us. When you've been taught by a particular person, it's as if there's part of their dough that is placed within you, something that has formed them, that has their character, and it becomes part of you. And you need to be very, very careful what you take into yourself. And so cutting off the old leaven of wickedness, the old leaven of false teaching, the old leaven of the traditions that lead us away from God, is absolutely imperative.

Because if you take that on, it will eventually determine your character. There is a flip side to the warning, of course. In the book of 1 Corinthians, we see the church described as a loaf.

And a loaf that is formed of many different people, we're all one loaf. Now, Christ's forming of a new loaf is formed in part through the gift of a new pattern of life, of new leaven that Christ has placed within us, his words and his spirit.

[12 : 55] And as a result, we take on a new character, the character of a loaf for God's glory. And so it matters a lot the way that we live as bread.

We're supposed to think also maybe of the relationship between the other themes of growing, of wheat and tares, and these other ways in which those symbols maybe feed into the symbolism of bread and yeast.

There's a process here. God is making bread for himself. And then think how that might relate to our celebration of the Lord's Supper, which concentrates the life of the church in the celebration of a shared eating of a loaf, which we all are.

We are one loaf, and so we share in one loaf. A question to consider. What might be learned about our gathering together in worship from this passage and its various elements?