

Jesus withdrew from the crowds and crossed to the opposite side of the Sea of Galilee to a deserted place to collect his thoughts and pray. It was not long however before the crowd pressed up against the disciples, calling for Jesus, seeking healing and comfort at his hands because of the signs that they saw him doing for the sick. The disciples knew that Jesus was seeking solitude, after all he never had time to himself, and he was always healing or preaching or performing signs and wonders. They were often overwhelmed by the crowds, and certainly they thought that Jesus must have felt the same way.

The disciples initially held their ground seeking to give their teacher a few moments to himself, however as the crowd continued to grow, word went out that Jesus had been seen leaving in a boat, and so with that the disciples guided the crowd to where Jesus had instructed them to meet him. The disciples were worried that when Jesus saw the crowd he would be angry with them for disturbing his peace. When they arrived at the appointed place, they could already see Jesus, moving about the crowd speaking with all who approached him and laying his hands on the many sick and dying. There was no anger in his eyes, only compassion; no frustration, only love.

As the day wore on into the evening the crowd – which had grown to about five thousand over the length of the day – began to grumble and search for food. The disciples could hear the rumbling of their own stomachs as Jesus went a little further up the mountain side and they followed him. Jesus asked Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” Phillip and the other disciples were shocked by the question. How could Jesus even consider feeding all these people? Didn’t he know how ludicrous a request that was? Philip in his disbelief responded “Six months’ wages would not even buy enough bread for each of them to get a little!” One of the other disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, piped in “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?”

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You can’t really fault the disciples for their disbelief and their reluctance to do what Jesus commanded them, after all feeding over five thousand people would have cost them well over six weeks wages and the thought of sharing our five loaves and two fishes amongst all of them certainly seems like a tall task. Philip and the disciples were only looking out for each other, they couldn’t possibly spend the resources they had to feed the multitude of people, so their response was to let the crowd fend for themselves, six weeks wages is a significant sacrifice and even then it would have left everyone with only crumbs, not enough to fill their bellies. Why should the disciples sacrifice their money, which would have bought their own food, in an effort that would leave no one satisfied? Surely it’s better for some people to be well fed on five loaves and two fish than for every to go hungry? Right?

I don’t know about you, but I’ve never been asked to personally buy food for thousands of people or feed them with only five loaves of bread and two fish, but if I were I certainly would have reacted the same way as the disciples did, with a mix of incredulity and reluctance. Unlike the disciples we may not face the real-world challenge of large-scale feeding on such a scarcity of resources, although I’m sure if you asked any aid worker during a famine they would they’d tell you exactly what it’s like, but we do in a more metaphorical sense.

How often have you heard people, or perhaps you have been, genuinely concerned about the ministries of the church and the challenge we face in today’s world. Every day in our churches we are faced with problems which seem insurmountable, we face dwindling numbers, dwindling financial returns or dwindling recognition for the good work that the church does do. Every day we are faced with the challenges of living out our faith in a society that at the best of times ignores us and at the worst of times humiliates us, insults us and sometimes even persecutes us. In the face of these challenges and hardships we might expect Jesus to offer us comforting words and a resting place where we can go to get away from it all, but instead Jesus confronts us and asks us, like he did the disciples “where are we going to buy bread for these people to eat?”, he asks us to do the impossible to go forth and proclaim the Good News in the face of all the hardships we encounter.

Regardless of the size or impossibility of the task ahead of us, Jesus calls us to confront them head on, to do the work that he has called us as a church to do. In the face of grief and sorrow we are reminded that we are called to be a community of faith, which comforts and uplifts one another. In the face of divisions in this world we are called to be a united community. In the face of brokenness and pain we are called to be a community of reconciliation. In the face of a society which shuns and ridicules us we are called to love our neighbours and enemies alike. In the face of dwindling numbers we are called to preach the Gospel afresh, to go and make disciples of all the nations, to proclaim the good news in word and deed. In the face of dwindling financial returns we are called to reach out to the poor and the oppressed with greater effort than before. In the face of dwindling recognition for the church’s good works we are called to redouble our efforts and to seek no recognition in return.

Everyday Jesus invites and challenges us to tackle the impossible tasks which face his church, waiting for our action and our answer. All too often our response to him is like that of the disciples, one of reluctance: we can’t do it because we don’t have the energy, or we don’t have enough money, or there just aren’t enough volunteers or we don’t have enough time because we’re too busy or we’ve never done it that way before. Like the disciples we can get caught up with our own concerns, trying to ensure that the precious resources our churches do have are used as we best see fit: on ventures with no risk of failure on the manageable tasks and challenges. Rarely do we focus our energy and resources on the seemingly impossible challenges which face the church, after all that would be foolhardy and we would see no results despite all of our hard work.

Like the disciples we are right, the task as we see it through our eyes is impossible, as human beings we are metaphorically (and literally sometimes) unable to feed the thousands of people with only five loaves of bread and two fish or six months wages. There are some challenges facing the church which are too great for us to overcome. We know that according to the logic of the world we must respond to Jesus' command with "But what are they among so many people?"

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The disciples' words hung in the air for a few moments as Jesus furrowed his brow and subtly shook his head. All along he knew they would respond this way, "They never do understand what I ask of them," thought Jesus "why must they always forget the great works of God." With that Jesus responded to the disciples, "Make the people sit down and bring the five loaves and two fish to me." His disciples were a little bemused by his request, but seeing that Jesus was indeed sincere they quickly brought the loaves and fishes before him.

The large crowd around Jesus slowly took their spots in the grass and waited for Jesus' next move. He took the loaves and as Jesus had done many times before, he looked up to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves. After breaking the bread he ordered the disciples to pass out the pieces to all those in the gathered. At first the disciples were sceptical, "just because he blessed it and broke it doesn't mean that there will be enough to feed the thousands here," they were thinking. The disciples moved around the crowd distributing dinner to all those who needed it: men, women and children, all ate their full. Each time the disciples' baskets were emptied they returned to Jesus to find more bread and fish to distribute amongst the crowd. When the disciples had delivered the food to the families seated at the edge of the crowd, they stood amazed that everyone had been able to get something to eat: not just paltry crumbs, but enough for everyone to be full!

The disciples quickly ate their own measure of bread and fish, as Jesus continued to pass through the crowd seemingly oblivious to the miracle he had performed. When the disciples had finished eating, Jesus spoke to them saying, "Gather up the fragments left over so that nothing may be lost." They did as Jesus commanded them and they were astounded that there was in fact food left over from the rations they had started with! Although briefly rendered motionless with shock the disciples began collecting up what was left over of the broken pieces and quickly filled the twelve baskets they had with them. When the crowd realized the sign that Jesus had had done they began to chant his name and some people shouted "this is indeed the prophet who is come into the world." As a surge of fervour went through the crowd, Jesus realized that they were about to take him by force to proclaim him King, and so he withdrew up the mountain...

The twelve baskets of leftover food were, for the disciples, a testament to the miracle that Jesus had performed and for the crowd a sign that Jesus was a prophet someone who could lead their nation to greatness once again. The crowd had misunderstood Jesus' miracle, they saw it for the worldly good it provided them and despite the many miracles Jesus had performed in the disciples' sight throughout his ministry in Galilee, they were unwilling to believe that Jesus could overcome the impossible task of feeding over five thousand people with five loaves and two fish, in that moment the disciples forgot that their teacher was one who spoke and acted with the authority of God, and was capable of anything. The disciples were for a moment unable to comprehend the nature of God, and His ability to intervene in situations which the logic of the world deems impossible. Despite their close friendship to Jesus the disciples had forgotten that God the Father is a God that makes the impossible, possible.

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We do not have the same luxury that the disciples or the crowd had in being witness to the earthly ministry of Jesus and so we can be excused when we occasionally forget that our God, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ was and always will be a worker of miracles. When we look at the challenges facing our church and see nothing but insurmountable obstacles, we are forgetting that in Jesus Christ the impossible is made possible. In Jesus the last become the first, the meek inherit the earth and death is turned into life. As Christians we centre our lives around an event, the Resurrection, which according to the logic of the world is impossible. As Christians we believe in a God that throughout history has consistently miraculously interacted with his Creation.

Even though we know and believe these things, sometimes we are reluctant to believe that God will make the impossible, possible for us, in our time. When we confront the challenge of preaching the Gospel afresh in the face of dwindling numbers, we must remember that it is God that makes the impossible, possible, not us. When we confront the challenge of being a community of faith that comforts and uplifts one another in the face of grief and sorrow, we must remember that God walks with us, making the impossible, possible. When we meet head-on the challenge of reaching out to the poor and the oppressed with greater effort in the face of dwindling finances, we are reminded that God is our great provider and makes the impossible, possible. When we confront the challenge of being a united community in the face of a divided and divisive world, we are reminded that it is God who unites us together as the body of Christ, making the impossible, possible.

We are not however let off the hook. While it's true that sometimes God works miracles in spite of us and our reluctance, for the most part God works his miracles through us. As disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to an active life following in the footsteps of our master. We are called to confront the challenges facing our church, and perform miracles no matter how insurmountable the task. As Christians we are called to live our lives in the realm of the impossible; knowing that with the Holy Spirit guiding us, Jesus walking beside us and God granting power to us, all things are made possible.

Amen.