

Sermon: Our Lord will help you

Mark 8:1-10

This morning I like to look at the gospel story - how Jesus satisfied thousands of hungry people with food. The obvious lesson from this: He loves his people and he takes care of them.

But first I like to thank you that you as a church have loved my kids and took care of them.

We have lived since 1988 in Egypt - and my wife and I still do. But when two of my three kids came to study here in Utrecht, you kindly received them - Stephanie and Rosemarie. And Stephanie and Jouke were married here by John de Wit.

You did a miracle job - maybe not in the league of what Jesus did - feeding those thousands, but for my wife and I as parents it was important that you welcomed our 18 year old daughters when they left the nest in Cairo.

1 4000? 5000?

To our Gospel reading now.

When we speak or preach about Jesus feeding the masses, we often talk about Jesus feeding the 5000. Here we read of Jesus feeding 4000.

Some theologians who know better than Mark and the other Gospel writers, have wondered whether there were truly two events or was it actually one event, with different stories going around?

Of course modern man doubts the veracity of the story. Was it not a good story, made up by the early church for teaching some moral lessons?

Because how in the world is this possible, that you have 7 loaves and you feed 4000 men, and you have 7 baskets left?

This is not possible in this world.

But with God all things are possible. If we erase God and his work from the picture of our world, we make ourselves the prisoners of a very limited world where cause and effect dictate all. Where freedom is lost. Where the impossible never happens.

But faith in God opens our mind for things that seem impossible.

God's presence in our world opens the prison - we are not locked inside this existence. There is more between heaven and earth than what we can repeat in a laboratory.

Especially the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, shows us vividly that there is much more than we humans can understand with our limited rationality.

The resurrection of our Lord, and his miracles, actually open our eyes, our heart, our mind, for the fact that life is much more than atoms, DNA and what is tangible.

I believe Jesus did a great miracle. He was able to feed 4000 hungry men - women and kids not even included - with a few loaves. Amazing!

But that other question, was there just one event and two different descriptions that circulated?

Well - we must take the writers of the Gospels seriously please. They were not writing sweet sunday school stories - they wrote serious stuff for mature people. And for them, what really happened was of the utmost importance. They therefore supply us with names, with dates, with times, with locations.

They really wanted to write what actually happened.

Also, take the early church seriously - many were eyewitnesses to these events. They knew what happened.

St Mark was not an eyewitness to the whole life of Jesus, though he was present in the later parts of Jesus' life and at his death. But he accompanied Peter on his travels. He wrote the gospel of Mark based on what he learned from Peter - and from the many other eyewitness that he met with.

St Mark was probably the first one to write a gospel - about 30 years after the actual events. There were so many people alive - Jewish people - who could easily debunk the stories if they had not actually occurred at all.

But what happened? Thousands and thousands of Jews became followers of Jesus and believed the Gospel stories - exactly because there were so many eye-witnesses corroborating the stories.

There were the 12 apostles. And the wider group of followers of Jesus. 500 had seen Jesus after he had risen from the dead. And there were the thousands and more people who were present when these miracles occurred.

The descriptions we have are credible eyewitness accounts. Jesus did feed 5000 and later 4000 men, at two separate events. Mark actually describes both of them

2 God at your side

There are some interesting differences in the stories of the 5000 and the 4000. The most important one is, that the miraculous dinner of the 5000 was in Jewish lands, while the 4000 received their food on pagan soil - they were probably non-Jewish.

As if Jesus wanted to make clear that he takes care both of his traditional covenant people, the Jews who believed in him, and he also takes care in the same way of those from all nations who became his followers - people like us.

Now does this really matter so much whether these stories are credible historical accounts? Can we not learn some good lessons even if we do not take them as historically correct descriptions?

But I am not interested in moralistic lessons. I need to know that God is beside me to help me. If we are hungry, if we thirst, if we have problems in life, we do not need just a few good thoughts, we need actual help.

I can believe that God exists and that he stands beside us to help us, when I see that he actually came to this world, and that he showed his great love, and that he did this in a powerful manner.

If Jesus had said to his disciples, quickly, buy much food for these 4000 men, we would today have said wow, he really loved people. He gave them what they needed.

Because he did it by an amazing miracle, we know of his love and also of his power to express this love not just in sweet words, but in action, even for us.

He had compassion with the people. He has compassion with you in your needs. And He can actually effectively help you.

It is a very human thing, if you see someone in trouble in a narrow dark alley in Utrecht, to quickly pass by. You do not want trouble. If I see beggars in Cairo - and we see many of them - my instinct is, walk on, ignore. Too much trouble.

When beggars come to my church for some help with paying their rent or for medical help, my first instinct is to lock the door, to keep them away. It is too much, and if I help them this month they surely come back next month. It can drive me nuts sometimes.

But Jesus was so moved with love and compassion, he showed his love. He made food for the people. he gave them what they really urgently needed.

The people had been three days with Jesus, listening to him. That seems a clear precondition for those who desire for God's blessings. Listen to him. When Jesus was transfigured on the mountain a voice sounded from heaven, saying: This is my Son, my beloved, listen to Him.

That is what these people were doing, and they enjoyed the benefits. Jesus blessed them. He took care of their needs.

If we need God's care for us, we need to be close to him, listen to him. Persevere in following him.

3 What needs does our Lord take care of?

And what sort of care does our Lord give?

In the first place, he cares for our daily needs. He wants hungry people to be fed, he wants sick people to be healed, he wants the unemployed to have a job.

He wants lonely people to have a friend. He wants sad people to be encouraged.

Our Lord wants fearful people to relax. He wants penniless people to have some money in their pocket.

He wants people in their job to be successful; he wants your business to succeed.

He wants your marriage to be good; your family to be blessed.

he wants the best for you.

He satisfies our basic needs. That is why we pray at Holy Communion, in the Lord's Prayer, give us today our daily bread.

If you today have special needs, ask our Lord, he hears our prayers. And what is so interesting, just as Jesus used the hands of the disciples to give the people their miracle food, so he usually uses the hands of others in our community to give us what we need.

To a large extent God uses his church - his children on earth - to satisfy in your needs. We are his hands to be a blessing for each other and for people outside. We are asked by our Lord to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, help the poor, be a friend for a lonely person. Heal the sick.

Our Lord calls you to do this. To be an extension of his hands, to express his love.

But Jesus also satisfies our spiritual needs.

When we hear the story of how Jesus gave the people their food, we hear these words:

And he took the seven loaves, and having given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and they set them before the crowd

This is a very clear reminder of the words in the eucharist we celebrate. These are the words Jesus used at the Last Supper, and these are the words we hear today, pointing at our heavenly bread, Jesus Christ.

As if the stories want to tell us, both for Jews and for gentiles, yes for all people that gather around Jesus to listen to him and follow him, he not only stands ready to be with you in all your life, to help you in your daily needs.

But he is also the great spiritual helper - the one who offered himself for the world, to reconcile God and humanity.

When we receive bread and wine it is as if Jesus tells you: I take care of you. I even paid with my life to take care of all your needs.

That is why St Peter in his letter could write, cast all your care on him, for he cares for you. Jesus showed that He cares for us, and he showed he has the power to care for us.

Conclusion

So when we kneel and receive bread and wine, receive them as a miracle from our Lord. he whispers in your ear, when you eat and drink: I care for you, I care for all your needs.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,
Amen