

“You give them something to eat!”
The feeling of inadequacy

Passages: 2 Kings 4:42-44
 Matthew 14:13-21

Introduction to new sermon series:

It has been 2 weeks since Malaysian Airlines Flight MH-17 was shot down over the Ukraine. In the first week, most news reports about the incident were focused on getting answers to the basic questions of Who? What? When? Where? and How?. In other words, our minds were taken up with the serious *intellectual* questions of what it meant to have a national airliner shot out of the sky.

But the second week of news reports was different. Did you notice the change? Gradually, the focus turned towards the *personal stories* of the passengers. We got insight into the devastation brought upon the families and loved ones of the victims...people who would never see their (sons, daughters, children, parents, aunts, uncles, nephews and nieces) again! In the second week of news, **we moved from the intellectual to the emotional**...and that was an important and healthy move for us to make! It allowed us to feel the pain and to empathise with those who were still struggling to comprehend the great tragedy of their loss. This shift of focus from the **intellectual** to the **emotional** helped us all to better understand the depths of the issue in the context of our common humanity.

This, I believe, is the same movement (from the intellectual to the emotional) **that also needs to happen when we read the Bible.** We always seem to start our Biblical reading on an intellectual level, exploring the questions of Who? What? When? Where? and How?. And because these intellectual questions can be so stimulating, we can easily stay at this level (endlessly teasing out ideas and working on theories). Sadly (and to the detriment of our understanding), the *emotional impact* of the story often gets overlooked.

What I want us to do, over the next 9 weeks, is to deliberately concentrate on an emotional reading of Scripture! **I want to do this for two reasons:** First, the God who made us “*in His image*” is revealed in Scripture as an **emotional** God. We are told that God *loves, feels compassion, is often grieved, feels sadness and sorrow, gets angry, feels jealous, and is often filled with joy.* And because

all human beings have made *in His image*, these same emotions form a very large part of who we are.

Secondly, I want to do this because, of all the **5 dimensions** of human life (*the Physical, the Spiritual, the Intellectual, the Social, and the Emotional*), this **emotional side of our humanity** is, sadly, often **the least explored, the least examined, and the least understood**. Why is that? Some of us have been taught not to have feelings...or to bury them alive! Most of what we call '*negative emotions*' (anger, rage, depression, sadness, lust, jealousy or fear) are frowned upon, and sometimes declared to be wrong or sinful! It's no wonder why we swallow our emotions; and, then, we lie to ourselves, pretending that we don't feel anything. We shut our emotions down.

In their book entitled, '**The Cry of the Soul**', Dan Allender and Tremper Longman speak up about the importance of allowing this emotional dimension of life to come out: *"Ignoring our emotions is turning our back on reality. Listening to our emotions ushers us into reality. And reality is where we meet God..."*

That's why Aisen and I have chosen nine passages from Matthew's Gospel which are packed with emotion. Our prayer is that, as we read these personal stories of Jesus and His disciples, we will allow ourselves to feel the full weight of those same emotions. Only then can we, like the disciples before us, bring the full reality of our emotional lives to Jesus... in brutal honesty and total vulnerability. We must do this...for one simple reason (and this will be the underlying philosophy of this entire sermon series): *When Jesus says to us, "Come, follow Me!", He's inviting **the whole of our being** to follow Him, **not just our intellect**. What this involves, at the very least, is that we experience our emotions in His presence, reflect on those feelings, and then thoughtfully respond to them under His Lordship.*

Anything less is not only a denial of who we are; it's a denial of who He is!

Let's pray.

The Feeding of the 5000

Open your Bibles to **Matthew 14:13-21**. This story, commonly known as "**The feeding of the 5000**", can be read in two different ways:

The first way (the traditional way) is what I like to call the “*Jesus is our model*” approach. It’s where everything Jesus does becomes something that we, in turn, must try to do. (WWJD)

In this model, we fix our eyes on a perpetually busy Jesus; one *who super-humanly pushes Himself through a long sequence of **traumatic, emotional events*** (...starting with the false accusations of the Pharisees (ch 12), the clear disappointment of His mother and brothers (ch 12), the blatant ridicule and rejection from His hometown synagogue (ch 13), and, finally, the death of His good friend and cousin, John the Baptist (ch 14)...) **and He never bats an eyelid!** And even when He decides that it’s time that He get away for a much needed break (as in verse 13), the needs of the crowd are so relentless that (out of an utterly selfless, driving *compassion* for others) Jesus has no choice but to meet their needs...even if it kills Him.

What this ‘*approach*’ to the Scriptures teaches us is that, **for those who are really serious about following Jesus**, they must (like Jesus) *push through their hurts and pains*. They must be driven by *compassion* for others to the point where they say to themselves, “*In the same way that Jesus denied His emotional needs, I must do the same...even if it kills me!*” In fact, in their minds, anything less than this total denial of self is not true discipleship.

This also means that, when we hear Jesus say to His disciples (in verse 16), “*You give them something to eat!*”, we read this as a **rebuke**; that Jesus is **attacking** them for not being totally selfless; that He is **chiding** them for not being ready and willing to give themselves totally to the task at hand; that He believes **they are being slack**.

Of course, this way of reading the text has serious **emotional consequences!** Because we are so often like the disciples, we begin to feel inadequate; we begin to feel like failures; we begin to believe that, like the first disciples, we are not spiritual enough; not dedicated enough! So we say to ourselves, “*We’ll do better next time! Like Jesus, we will deny our emotions! Like Jesus, we will push through any pain, or doubt, or fear! He, after all, is our model!*”

But, stop for a moment and think about it: Is this really the way we should read today’s passage? I don’t think so! After all, **what did we learn from the parables of Matthew 13?** The one thing that all those parables had in common was that **Jesus stood at the centre of each one!** He alone was the source and the agent of the Kingdom of Heaven! **He alone** (as Sower, Farmer, Gardener,

Woman, Treasure Hunter or Pearl Merchant) **was bringing the Kingdom of Heaven** (as Seeds, a Mustard Tree, Yeast) **to this earth**. He alone was causing the Kingdom to spread over the earth as He influenced both the Jews (the Treasure) and the Gentiles (the Pearls)! In every parable, Jesus was the key to the final *salvation* and *transformation* of the world.

Once you get this in your head, then you read will the Bible from quite a different angle—namely, from the perspective of the Kingdom of Heaven! No longer is Jesus the ‘super-model’ that we must try hard to emulate! (Imitation is not true discipleship!) *True discipleship begins* when we recognise that Jesus, alone, is the one and only Saviour...a Saviour who chooses to complete His work through weak and fragile vessels like us. Indeed, *true discipleship begins* only when **we recognise and accept our fragility and connect it with Christ’s unique Lordship!**

So, let’s go back to today’s story and read it through that lens.

As we already noted, the story really starts back in chapter 12, where Jesus is falsely accused and derided by the Pharisees. Soon after, He has an altercation with His family—they have come to question His sanity. Next, we see Him come to his hometown synagogue of Nazareth, where Jesus is disrespected and treated like a child. Finally, we watch as Jesus hears the news of His friend, cousin and forerunner, John the Baptist, being beheaded by King Herod.

From this traumatic sequence of events in Jesus’ life, what are we meant to learn? We are meant to understand that **Jesus has received a unique calling from His Father to be ‘God’s Suffering Servant’**. He alone comes to take upon Himself the brunt of humanity’s emotional pain. This, in fact, is the whole reason why Matthew strategically inserts a quote from Isaiah 42 into the storyline of chapter 12. Isaiah’s description of the Messiah makes Jesus’ *unique role* very clear:

¹⁸ ***“Here is my servant whom I have chosen,
the one I love, in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will proclaim justice to the nations.***

¹⁹ ***He will not quarrel or cry out;
no one will hear his voice in the streets.***

²⁰ ***A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out,***

till he has brought justice through to victory.
²¹ ***In his name the nations will put their hope."***

Matthew inserts this text to deliberately underline the uniqueness of Jesus-- that He, and He alone, has been called to bear this enormous emotional weight on His shoulders; that He, and He alone, must carry the pain of rejection and grief, just like Isaiah said He would. (As Isaiah 53 will tell us, He's "***a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief...***") **And yet, despite it all, He would continue to minister to others, even when His own heart was breaking.**

How would He do this? Where would Jesus find the supernatural strength to carry on? As Isaiah 42 tells us, He would be **buoyed by the Spirit of God**. Not even God's "Suffering Servant" was meant to carry all His pain alone. In the beauty of the eternal fellowship of the Trinity, Jesus was able to share His emotional burden with the Father and the Spirit. In this way, Jesus neither needed to deny His emotions, nor allow them to distract Him. **With the divine help of the Father and the Spirit, Jesus could press on in His unique mission!** He had come to sow the seeds of the Kingdom of heaven throughout this earth! He had come to plant a new mustard seed so that the birds of the air could rest in its branches; He came to mix the yeast of the Kingdom in the dough of this world until everything was touched and changed by its power. *And He knew that He had to finish His work, soon...while it was still day..., because night was coming when no man can work!*

That's the only reason why, when the crowds came to Jesus in Matthew 14, **He knew He had no choice but to get back into it!** No one else could accomplish His work of bringing the Kingdom of Heaven to earth—no one else! That's why we see Jesus **alone**, expending Himself in the healing of the multitudes. That's why we see the divine compassion of God oozing out of Him to meet the needs of the people.

I am not saying that Jesus didn't, Himself, need some time out. He needed it; and *He knew* that He needed it, as verse 13 suggests. And at many points, He was able to find a quiet place to regroup! But, He also knew that He was running a race which only He could finish! **He knew that He only had three years to expend Himself for the world's salvation.** (In fact, some commentators have suggested that the death of John the Baptist was a powerful reminder to Him that the clock was, indeed, ticking!)

Now, let's take up the story with **verse 15**...and let's see if we can enter into the **emotional experience of the disciples!**

When the disciples finally arrive on the scene, it's late in the day. They see an enormous crowd surrounding Jesus and quickly come to understand that everyone is hungry! They immediately panic! Listen:

¹⁵ As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."

Quite naturally, **the disciples feel overwhelmed!** This is, in fact, a very normal reaction! As human beings, God has equipped us with a natural ability to see when a situation is too much for us to handle! (We call it *self-preservation!*) Hence, everything they say to Jesus makes perfect sense. In fact, let's be very clear: *There is nothing wrong with their reaction!*

Indeed, this is where a reading of this story *through the lens of the Kingdom of Heaven* really pays dividends. **This story is not about Jesus making His disciples feel guilty; that, somehow, they didn't do more for the crowd! Quite the opposite!** When Jesus responds to them, in verse 16, He is not scolding them for their lack of compassion, or rebuking them for their slackness. Rather, **He is testing them to see what they will do with their emotions—with their feelings of being overwhelmed and inadequate!**

That's why He says to them, **"They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat"**. You see, the wonderful irony is that **He knew they had nothing to give!** It was a test...a test of their discipleship! Discipleship includes our emotions. *Discipleship assesses how you react emotionally when you come to the end of your resources!* And so, even as Jesus told His disciples. *"You give them something to eat"*, He was watching to see what they would do with that request. **Would they admit their inadequacies and turn to Him for a solution?**

In the end, this is exactly what happens! When they realise that they have almost nothing in their hands, they turn to Jesus ...who, in turn, gives back to the disciples so that they might give to the people! (This, in fact, is a beautiful preview of the ministry of the Church that will follow from this. All ministry begins with the recognition that we have nothing, and that Jesus alone can meet the needs of this world.)

What we learn, here, is that **true discipleship** is not about emulating Jesus. It's about learning to recognise *the gift of His presence* ('Emmanuel, God with us')

from within the turmoil of our own emotions! In the midst of our feelings of inadequacy, we are called to search our hearts and ask ourselves; *“Do we emotionally (and not just intellectually) believe that Jesus is the Saviour of the world?”*

This is certainly what the disciples were being forced to consider. After all, with their heads, they knew Jesus spoke like Israel’s promised Messiah! They could see, by the many healings He performed, that He also acted like Israel’s promised Messiah. But, it’s was only when Jesus finally put them to the test, saying ***“You give them something to eat”***, that all their intellectual arguments coalesced into one emotional issue: Would they trust Jesus? Would they turn to Him in faith, **believing that** (like Moses in the wilderness who fed the entire nation of Israel in the desert with the miraculous provision of manna and quail), **this man could do the same?**

Isn’t this what this story is really all about? And isn’t this the reason why Jesus not only meets the immediate needs of the crowd, but deliberately **‘over-caters’**, with 12 baskets of food left-over? Isn’t Jesus proving that, not only can He meet the needs of those present, but He can also meet the needs of all 12 tribes of Israel? The conclusion is meant to be obvious: **Surely, one greater than Moses is here!** (In the next “feeding” miracle found in Matthew 15, done amongst Gentiles, Jesus will prove that, not only can He meet the needs of those Gentiles who were present but, with 7 baskets of food left-over...the number of completion..., He can satisfy the needs of the entire Gentile world!).

But today’s story also resonates with another OT story found in **2 Kings 4**. In 800 BC, during a severe famine, a large hungry crowd gathered around **Elisha**, the prophet, totally desperate for food. When a man appears with 20 loaves of barley, no one believes that this will come close to satisfying the masses; *no one but Elisha!* Unperturbed, Elisha says to the man, ***“Give it to the people!”*** The man responds, ***“How can I set this before a hundred men?”*** But Elisha insists. The story concludes in verse 44—***“Then he set it before the men and they ate and had some left over, according to the word of the Lord!”***

It’s easy to see how these ancient stories are taken to a new level in Jesus Christ. Here, it’s not 20 loaves that get multiplied, but only 5. Here, it’s not hundreds who need to be fed, but thousands! But the point, once again, is simple: **Someone greater than Elisha is here!** The unique Messiah, the *Suffering Servant*, has finally come to Israel! And **wherever He goes**, we can expect powerful evidence that **the Kingdom of Heaven follows!**

There are so many more things we could say about today's story, but let me try to draw what I've said so far to a simple **conclusion**.

The main point of today's story is that Jesus is the unique Messiah, and that, as the Messiah, He will meet every need of His people.

But, of course, within this is a question of **discipleship**...of what it means to follow Jesus. For the fact is, **discipleship can never be simply an intellectual pursuit** (memorising Bible verses and taking courses in discipleship). **It has to involve our emotions.**

So, take a moment to reflect: In what situations are you feeling inadequate? What emotional crisis are you now facing that you need to see as a test from God? Is it something to do with your job? Are you finding it hard to cope? Like the disciples, would you prefer that God would send all your problems away? Let me remind you—**Jesus is there**. He knows about your circumstances, and He wants to reveal Himself as your unique Saviour *in the midst of your feelings of inadequacy*.

Perhaps you're dealing with a friend who's feeling down or broken, and you feel *inadequate* to help. Remember what Jesus says: "*You give them something to eat!*" In other words, step forward in trust that the compassion which continually flows from the Father, through the Son and Spirit, is available to you. God wants to use your *feelings of inadequacy* to make you depend more on Him more, as you seek to meet the needs of others.

As the Apostle Paul said to the Philippians, "***I can do everything through him who gives me strength.***" You can do it **through Christ**...because the One who is greater than both Moses & Elisha is with you, and lives inside of you!

Let's pray.