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Introduction

Jesus continues his conversations with ‘the crowd.’ Having experienced the ‘miraculous multiplication’, they are still hungry. Taking their direct questions about his itinerary, and responding to their requests for advice, clarity, and food, Jesus answers in seeming riddles. How often do the real needs of the masses get obscured by political fluff and cotton wool? How frequently do the clamours of the poor and the needy get folded in to fake news and posturing diatribe? In Jesus’ responses we see an opposite direction of travel. Jesus takes the straight questions, gives them honour, respect and depth, and offers deep responses. And the proof of his political and spiritual efficacy? The people ask for the bread of life.

Text

John 6:22-35

The next day the crowd that had stayed on the other side of the lake saw that there had been only one boat there. They also saw that Jesus had not got into the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks.^[f] So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus

When they found him on the other side of the lake, they said to him, ‘Rabbi, when did you come here?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for

me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.’ Then they said to him, ‘What must we do to perform the works of God?’ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.’ So they said to him, ‘What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, “He gave them bread from heaven to eat.”’ Then Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.’ They said to him, ‘Sir, give us this bread always.’

Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.’

Comment

This text offers us moves for a rich and deep dance. This is a Crowd–Jesus dance, between direct questions and mystical responses. The crowd has been captivated by Jesus and his actions, and has grown in intensity and size as they have followed Jesus through Galilee.

Three times the crowd asks direct questions of Jesus. Three times Jesus responds.

Dance 1: The Hunger Hornpipe

Crowd to Jesus: Where did you go?

Jesus to Crowd: You ask me, where did I go, when did I get here. My guess is you’re less interested in my itinerary, more interested in your experience of full bellies. What I say to you is: you are only looking for me – you are only hungry for me – because you’ve been looking for nourishment that doesn’t fill you. That miracle with the loaves and fishes only makes sense if you notice the deeper truth. Here’s what I meant: You’ve been gorging on insubstantial fast-food. Look for me, and I will give you food that lasts for ever.

“God bless to us our bread
And give bread to all those who are hungry,
and hunger for justice to those who are fed.
God bless to us our bread.”
(in *‘Sing with the World’*, Wild Goose Resource Group. www.wildgoose.scot)

This blessing for a meal sums up a practical paradox: the world is full of hungry people; the world is full of full people. The hunger of those in need of food, clothing, shelter must be addressed. Many local and global actions are being taken daily to address these needs. Yet there are more and more stories of hunger, poverty and need. At the same time, our world is full of people who are themselves full: of food, wealth, accommodation, leisure time, fulfilling work. The hunger of those without food must be met by sharing of the world’s resources. At the same time, we must ignite hunger for justice, for peace, for equality for all amongst those

who are fed. This is the deeper hunger, or work to which Jesus points us, the crowd.

Dance 2: The Action Reel

Crowd to Jesus: What must we do?

Jesus to Crowd: Your core ‘work’, dear friends, it to believe; to follow. Life is as much about being, as it is about doing. Your work is to look around you, notice the signs that are being performed by the one God sent; and believe in them. The actions that are God’s work, are actions that bring life, that nourish not just the body, but nourish the soul. This is what it means to ‘clock on’, to ‘sign in’, to perform the works of God.

The Protestant work ethic drives many of us to the brink of breakdown. Are we doing enough? Are we busy enough? More importantly, are we being seen to be busy? Are we achieving our agreed goals and outcomes?

The work that Jesus is calling us, the crowd, to is a work of the heart as much as a work of the hands. Be still. Believe. Stay true to a path of faith. Recognise this as your ‘work’.

Dance 3: The Signs and Works Jig

Crowd to Jesus: What signs will you give us? What works are you performing?

Jesus to Crowd: You ask: what signs will I give you so that you may believe. I say to you, look around at what’s happening in your community now. Where are the hungry? Feed them. Where are the poor? Give them resources. Where are people hurting? Bring healing. Where are relationships broken? Offer reconciliation. The people in your midst are the signs you need that will point you to actions.

Are we prone to look to the past as our navigation tool? How often do we refer to what’s gone before as our blue-print for what’s to come? Patterns and movements in history can be useful tools or triggers: signs from which we can learn. But if we become beholden to the past, then we may fall into the trap of repeating negative patterns of behaviour more suited to a previous age.

In his response to the crowd here, Jesus does not dismiss our trawling of our past, but encourages us, the crowd, to look for a deeper truth in our history. Looking beyond the narrative to the deeper truth can point us to God’s actions in the world that are wider than the actions of human beings, recorded in the annals of history. As we imagine a new future for our faith communities, and as we navigate change and transition, through difficult conversations, how often do we find ourselves trapped in the past, trying to replicate actions rooted in nostalgia rather than wisdom?

Response

- o Imagine yourself as a member of the crowd – what tone would your question

have? How would you feel on receiving Jesus' response?

o What are the deep hungers in the crowds, the community around you?

o How is your soul fed in times of change, transition or difficulty?

o What, or who are the prophets living in your street, your community, your network? What are the actions that they are pointing to, actions that will bring about deep structural change?

Prayer

God of every dance,
open our hearts to deep questions that take us beyond platitudes;
replenish our bellies with a hunger for justice to change patterns of neglect;
fill our dancing shoes with bright bells to bring joy to the journey.

God of every dance, each pattern of action and reflection,
root us in the dance of life
made visible as a clear sign for us
in your son Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.