

Sermon 06 07 30

Peace Church **30th July 2006**

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God gives – we receive

Ephesians 3 : 14-21 Paul Prays for God's People

¹⁴I bow in prayer to the Father because of my work among you. ¹⁵From the Father his whole family in heaven and on earth gets its name.

¹⁶I pray that he will use his glorious riches to make you strong. May his Holy Spirit give you his power deep down inside you. ¹⁷Then Christ will live in your hearts because you believe in him.

And I pray that your love will have deep roots. I pray that it will have a strong foundation. ¹⁸May you have power with all God's people to understand Christ's love. May you know how wide and long and high and deep it is. ¹⁹And may you know his love, even though it can't be known completely. Then you will be filled with everything God has for you.

²⁰God is able to do far more than we could ever ask for or imagine. He does everything by his power that is working in us. ²¹Give him glory in the church and in Christ Jesus. Give him glory through all time and for ever and ever. Amen.

John 6 : 1-13 Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand

¹Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), ²and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick.

³Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples.

⁴The Jewish Passover Feast was near.

⁵When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" ⁶He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

⁷Philip answered him, "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" ⁸Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, ⁹"Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"

¹⁰Jesus said, "Have the people sit down."

There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them. ¹¹Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

¹²When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted."

¹³So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

I wonder how many times you've heard that story of the feeding of the 5000? It's one of the best-known passages in the whole Bible. It's a wonderful story about giving. The little boy gives his lunch - and Jesus does a miracle! It's a great encouragement to us all to give..

But at the same time, there's an awful lot of *receiving* going on in this story – and that's what I'd like us to take a look at today ...we're going to see how God gives – and how people receive; how God gives – and how we receive.

So let's start with the 'great crowd of people' we meet in verse 2.

Later on we find out that there are 5,000 men, not even counting women and children – so it really *is* a *great* crowd of people – and of course, down the years we've got used to talking about them as 'the 5000'.

Trouble with that is, it's hard for us to relate to thousands of people.

They're just a huge mass – like those long-range shots of football crowds on TV – a sea of faces, with no-one you can identify as an individual.

But let's remember that to Jesus, these people are not one big group – to Jesus, these are individual human beings with individual lives and individual needs

These thousands of individuals are following Jesus because of his miracles – they've seen him healing people and they want to see more of the same! When Jesus crosses the lake by boat, all these folk go all the way round - on foot - to catch him up. It's a long way round, it probably takes quite a time – but they are prepared to go that far – because they want to find out more.

It's the same starting-point for most people today : –

If we hear about God making a difference to people, if we know someone who claims Jesus has helped or healed them, then we may be prepared to go some way to find out more. It's what starts people praying - or reading a book about faith - or coming along to church. And nothing can happen in the way of giving or receiving before that.

The next thing we hear about the crowd is that they are being told to sit down on the grass and take the weight off their feet – and they do exactly what the disciples tell them to do.

Sitting down, doing what we're asked, letting other people take charge – all of that puts us in a position to receive.

Many of us may find that quite hard : we'd rather be the one standing up, the one in charge, the one giving, than the one sitting, waiting to receive. But Jesus wants all these people to sit down and be ready to receive.

We have a friend back in England – Malcolm - who's involved with the churches in Rwanda and Burundi in Central Africa. I remember him telling us a wonderful story after one visit there.

He'd been out to see some villages in the countryside : – the roads were fairly rough and bumpy and so he and his guide used a big heavy truck – one of those with an open back and bench seats. They were driving along one road, with about 5 miles to go to the next village, when they saw a group of women carrying huge pots of water on their heads – they were walking back to the village with the water for the day. ... Anyway, they stopped and offered the women a lift. They were all very grateful – they climbed into the back – off they went.... It was only as they got near the village that Malcolm looked behind him and realised that all the women still had their water pots on their heads! So when they stopped, he said to his driver, “Why on earth didn't the women put their water pots down?! They didn't have to carry them when they were in the truck!”

And the women's answer was : “Well, it was really kind of you to offer us a lift – but it was quite enough that you carried us – we couldn't expect you to carry the water as well.” !!!!!!!!

Isn't that what we so often do with God? We like riding with Jesus – we ask him to carry us through life - but we still insist on bearing our burdens ourselves. His strength and his power are there for us – but we just don't get to the point of putting down the fear and the worry. God is ready to give – we're not always ready to receive. And then again – We may not be that keen on doing what he tells us to do – letting him take charge – especially when it means giving something up or changing something we've got used to...

This great crowd of people do sit down when they are told, do wait until the disciples come round, - and do RECEIVE as much bread and fish as they can eat - - so much, in fact, that the leftovers fill 12 hand-baskets.

Jesus made quite a lot more food than they needed!

Now I'm not recommending wasting food – but I do think this is an important lesson to us (!) :- when God gives and we receive, God always has more to give. God gives – we receive. That's how it is for a Christian.

People sometimes complain to me that they are NOT receiving from God in the way they expect. “We've had all the troubles,” someone said to me a while ago, “when are the blessings going to start?!”

Well, if we feel like that, let's start off by making sure that we are in the right position to receive – like this crowd of people.

Let's make sure we've done what God tells us; that we've handed our worries to him in prayer and aren't still carrying them ourselves – and that we are “sitting down” – in other words, that we're letting him take charge and that we're ready to receive..

But surely we've got to start talking now about the way we should *give* as Christians. “God gives – we receive” is okay – but surely, once we've found Jesus and we're his followers, we're the givers – right??

Well, we've got some really close followers of Jesus to look at here – the disciples – and one in particular – Philip.

Now he certainly feels he should be giving – in fact, Jesus seems to expect it of him.. “Where shall we buy bread for these people?” asks Jesus. “Where shall we buy bread for these people?!” What's Philip to say?? Jesus obviously wants these people looked after. And he seems to be asking Philip to do something about it.... But Philip can't see how he can cope! “Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!” Philip hasn't got any money! And you'd need a small fortune to feed this lot! Poor Philip – he can't give these people what they need – he obviously should – but he can't! – it's hopeless! And it always is hopeless when we think WE ought to be giving – that God is depending on us, rather than the other way round!

The thing is : God gives – and we receive. That's how it all starts – and that's how it is. I think Jesus asked Philip for that money so that Philip would always remember, forever after, that in the end, it was Jesus who gave – and Philip who received. Yes, Jesus did want Philip to feed the crowd – but Jesus gave him the food to do it with!! Philip was never meant to do the giving on his own.

And that's where so many followers of Jesus still go wrong.

If we think we've got to find the patience to put up with so-and-so; the forgiveness to offer the person who's hurt us; the energy to cope with the stresses of day to day life – if we think we've got to find all this and more on our own – we will be just like Philip – panicky and dismayed – because we know we don't have enough to give. God knows it too – and he wants us to start receiving instead. God gives patience – we receive it. God gives forgiveness – we receive it. God gives energy - we receive it.

And when we've received it, then we can share it with other people.

Just like Philip and his friends share out the bread and fish – they're the ones who physically hand the food to people. But they are only passing on what Jesus has given to them. And that's all that Christian giving ever

is. It's giving what we have first received from God – and passing it on to other people. God gives – we receive. God gives – we receive – and then we share.

Of course, we can't leave this story without mentioning the boy – the boy with the 5 small loaves and 2 fish. And he does genuinely give – he offers his food to Andrew - perhaps he thought Jesus would like to share it with him.... So the boy gives – but even here we see the same principle at work – that God gives and we receive. Because while the boy does give his food, in no time at all he's receiving as well. First of all, he receives a blessing. Jesus blesses the food he offers – and whatever God blesses becomes a great joy in our lives. And then he receives his share of the 'as much as you eat' meal – perhaps he ate more food than he'd started with ! -and on top of that, he has the thrill of being included in Jesus' work. When we give to God, we receive such blessings back – including the thrill of being included in his work..

And then, of course, giving to God isn't the same as other giving.... The boy gives up his food – but he doesn't lose it. And that's the spiritual maths that's always at work in God's kingdom. We give time to a job God wants us to do – we find we have enough time that day. We give money to a cause God wants us to support – we find we have enough money that week. We give caring love to another person – we find we have enough love for them and ourselves...

If this doesn't make sense – if this doesn't chime with our own experience – then we need to start at the beginning again – we need to do as God tells us; we need to sit down like the crowd, we need to be ready to rest and receive before we try to stand up and serve. We need to receive from God and then share his blessings with other people - rather than trying to give from an empty heart. We need to learn for ourselves that God gives and we receive. Amen.

Let us pray. (using some of St Paul's words to the Ephesians)
Lord God, show us how to trust you; to hand over our burdens so the weight is truly lifted from our shoulders. Guide us to obey you and let you take charge in our lives. Meet our needs and fill us with your love, that we may share that love with others. Thank you so much that you give and we receive. We pray that God will use his glorious riches to make us strong. May his Holy Spirit give us his power deep down inside us. May we have power...to understand Christ's love ...may we know his love....then we will be filled with everything God has for us. God is able to do far more than we could ever ask for or imagine. He does everything by his power that is working in us. Give God glory through all time and for ever and ever. Amen!

