

A hot day, slightly overcast, beautiful green pasture on a hill, a soft round hill. Time stands still except for the soft breeze rippling the grass in a gentle rhythm. Perfect for a picnic.

You could see 13 men who were walking down the gentle slope. They had come to get some space. To get away from it all. To stop and chill for a while. The days prior had been totally exhausting : people, people, people. Crowds of people who expected these 13 men to perform.

It's like how stand up comedians try to have a normal conversation at a party but people always expect them to be funny, tell jokes and make them laugh. This is the pressure that these 13 men felt except 100 times worse because they had people expecting them to perform 24/7— they couldn't escape. Especially the ring leader.

This man Jesus wasn't a comedian, he was more like a magician with a social conscience. His reputation was quite remarkable. People were intrigued to see a real live, bona fide, miracle worker in their midst—there was something different about his magic though—it actually worked. There's nothing quite like seeing a withered leper's hand being restored to normal, in front of your very eyes; or people who couldn't walk for years suddenly getting up and their legs normal and healthy.

One woman had been brave enough to force herself through a crowd that would have been revolted by how her clothes were covered with bloodstains from her menstrual haemorrhaging. She was considered untouchable by the religious legal system so she was unable to work, and could do nothing other than beg, she was desperate to touch him hoping that she would be made well and start life anew. And she treated Jesus like a lucky charm, and he saw this as faith and she was healed.

He touched the untouchable. He cured the un-curable. He loved the unlovable. Jesus was different to the other magicians, he wasn't a show off, he was motivated by deep compassion.

So his disciples were hanging around with this very special person. And the disciples were also gaining a reputation because they too were able to heal all kinds of diseases. And people were genuinely impressed.

Truth is that they were becoming celebrities and you could see it in the way that the disciples walked. Strutting

their stuff, heads a little higher than normal, walking with their hips instead of their shoulders. They thought they knew it all, they thought they had it sweet, they now possessed God given magical powers to heal people.

As for Jesus, he was physically exhausted, Son of God or not, the sheer emotional pressure of all these people on his human body was getting to him. It wasn't easy for him to see people in clear physical distress being so overwhelmed by their physical pain, that they couldn't see their spiritual disconnection.

It wasn't easy to walk around the Jews, his chosen people—the only people on the planet who had some kind of knowledge of the one true God—and Jesus saw plainly what desolation lay there. These people, like church, supposedly knew God and were supposedly saved and possessed all the vehicles for restoring their relationship with their creator. But instead of searching for God, they formulated a political movement to believe in.

You see they were oppressed by their Roman rulers. They were scared because they were uncertain about the future of their nation. They had no real hope, because it's easy to be cynical when you can't see God.

There in Jesus' face all the time was the legacy of a failed religion. A religion distorted by intellectuals who had too much time on their hands, a religion that instead of being a pathway to God had become a stumbling block for the common people, a religion that was stripped of the fluidity of divine love and replaced with a complicated structure of unbending rules and regulations. It is not that far removed from our own religion is it, though perhaps we don't want to admit it.

And Jesus, love incarnate, the love of God in the flesh saw the desperation of these peoples' hearts as they hoped for something, anything miraculous to take place, any sign from heaven, anything to happen that might let them see that God hadn't forgotten them. But not so they could enjoy relationship with him, but so they could invest their personal worth in being set apart and God's special people, and replace their feeling of oppression with corporate pride. That was the dream. To become the one nation again, oh, who also believed in God.

But they missed the heart of the message, and their desires were not their needs. They were left wanting though they didn't know what for.

This conflict that raged inside the people he saw every day, this confusion, this unspoken disconnection wore away at the human fabric of Jesus the incarnate Son of God. So he went to find some space.

Green field, shade of trees, cool freshly drawn water. It was a perfect place for them to stop, lie down and watch the clouds for a while. Which is what they were doing.

"There he is!" they heard a cry from afar and saw a group of around 20 people moving toward the man who shouted.

The disciples looked at Jesus who much to their surprise didn't roll his tired eyes, but just looked steadily at these advancing people and then took a sip of his water. He turned to his disciples and gave a wry grin.

One of the disciples asked, "do you want me to go and tell them to rack off and leave you alone?" Jesus looked back at the disciple and then nodded at the hill. The disciple turned to see that there were now another eighty or so people coming toward them now. "Oh," resigned the disciple and slumped back onto the ground with a heavy sigh.

The first of the crowd came up close and sat down and expectantly watched every move the disciples and Jesus made.

They all sat there at the bottom of the hill and watched the crowd get bigger and bigger and bigger. After a few hours there were thousands of people. A veritable throng. All sitting around enjoying the sunshine. Eagerly awaiting Jesus to speak to them and, more importantly, to heal them.

Jesus got up and began to wander around the crowd and as he wandered around he would touch people who needed healing and he would tell people about the wonder of the kingdom of heaven.

Can you imagine the atmosphere after he healed the first person? You know how when you're eating fish and chips on the beach and all these seagulls come from out of nowhere in the hope that you will throw them something? And then when you do, when you throw a chip into the middle they all rush to it and grab it and then fly away

leaving the others to turn back to you with an expectant look. After Jesus performed his first healing, there were such shouts of joy from the sufferer that the crowd sprang into life and rushed to him so that they could be next in line.

The crowd knew that 5,000 people is a lot of people to heal. If it took a minute per person it would take 83 hours. Let's say 10% needed healing it would still take about 8 hours. So they didn't want to miss out this time and there they were, eager to be touched by his perfect record healing hand.

Seagulls gather round to satisfy their hunger without a second thought for *why* someone might feed them—they just want fed. People flocking and taking from God without recognising why this was happening. And still Jesus had compassion on them. He knew they were being selfish, he knew they didn't understand completely, but he also knew that this glimpse of the divine that they were getting was more than they would ever have in their lifetimes.

His compassion flowed out of him, just like a sower sowing seed, some was well received, some wasn't understood at all. Some of it would later become confused for something else. But for those who flourished, it was a beauty that they would cling to so preciously. Jesus' compassion was the kingdom of heaven. It was so precious that some would give up all they have for it, like a merchant who saw a magnificent pearl and sold all he had so he could own it. For some Jesus' compassion would be an inspiration to want some kind of fellowship with God their creator that they otherwise didn't have.

It was getting late. The sun was beginning to change colour and become more yellowy as the shadows increased in length. The onslaught of people seeking Jesus had not relented.

The disciple Philip came up to Jesus. "Don't you think we should send them away now? They're probably very hungry. They need to be on their way so they can get some food."

Jesus turned to him. "Philip you are absolutely right. They do look like they are starving. Where can we buy bread for them to eat?"

Philip stopped in his tracks. It wasn't like Jesus to misunderstand something. "Jesus must be really tired" he thought to himself. "Um, Jesus, uh, I think you must have misheard me. I was thinking that we could send them away . . ."

Jesus gave him the I-know-exactly-what-you-said-but-I-want-to-do-something-else look. Philip scratched his head, looked down at the ground, frowned and then looked back at the crowd. Pondered and then looked back at Jesus.

"Yeah . . .um . . .there's a lot of people there. Even if we were to get them a slice of bread each it would cost around \$15,000. Don't you think that's a little ambitious? What do you want us to do, have a quick whip around and see what loose change the 12 of us have together?"

"Why don't we just send them away to fend for themselves?"

But how could Jesus send them away? How could the Son of God send away the crowds without providing for them? Besides, the suggestion lacked faith. The disciples were in the midst of seeing hundreds of people being miraculously healed. They were witnessing miracles. And they knew that Jesus wasn't just confined to *healing* miracles—he had turned the water into wine at the Wedding of Cana. But they still didn't understand that Jesus could *do* anything.

Jesus said to Philip, "You've got a brain on you, go work out what you need for the job and we'll see what we can do. I'll be over in a minute."

Philip went back to the other disciples perplexed and a little bummed out. He moped up to them and said, "I was talking to Jesus, and he's gone and put me in charge of feeding all these people. So we need some cash.

"So, what have we got then?"

The disciples patted down their pockets and came up with nothing.

"OK" Philip scratched his head again and was about to go back to Jesus when Andrew brought a little boy forward.

"This kid says he'll give his family dinner which is 5 loaves of bread and two fish. He says it's all his family have got to eat but he knows Jesus will be able to do anything with it and he says that surely it's better than nothing. Maybe there are others out there who will do the same, we only need a thousand of them . . ." and his voice tapered off

as he realised how ludicrous he sounded. An awkward flummoxed silence descended upon the group.

Jesus came over, clapped his hands together and rubbed them. “Well, are we ready? Where’s the food?”

They pushed the little boy to the centre of the circle more as a sarcastic comment than anything.

A little boy, 5 loaves of bread, two fish and bit of faith. Jesus looked at the disciples again, and then crouched down, put his hands on the boy’s shoulders and smiled at him. The boy presented the food to Jesus, “I’m going to get in trouble for this,” he said.

“No your not,” said Jesus, “trust me.”

Jesus took the loaves of bread and the fish and gave thanks to God for his provision and broke them up and put them into twelve baskets. He said to the disciples,

“Why don’t you hand this around for me?”

Reluctant-obediently Peter picked up a basket that had a small chunk of bread rattling around in it. Screwed up his face, rolled his eyes and walked off shaking his head to “hand around” his piece of bread. He knew there was no point arguing with Jesus. This was just going to be another lesson for him to learn about humility or something.

He went to the front of the crowd. Held the basket in front of him. Looked back at Jesus before turning to the people in front and hollering, “come and get your piece of bread.”

“Thank you” came the solitary voice of a person who grabbed the piece of bread. Peter was just about to walk back when another person thanked him for *their* piece of bread. And another thanked him, and another and soon the whole seagull effect happened yet again except as people came to get the food. Peter found himself in the middle of a throng of people who were grabbing pieces of bread from his basket.

His jaw dropped as the basket got heavier and heavier. He looked across at Jesus who was laughing, not making fun, but enjoying watching all these people satisfied. Peter began laughing too. It was a pretty neat trick. No matter how much bread was taken, the basket just kept being full. And this happened for all the disciples. And at the end of it they had plenty left, and they gave the little boy his loaves and fish back and sent him on his way home.

Cute eh? But that's not the end of the story, that's where we usually finish it, but it's not the end. Something very interesting happens immediately after.

Someone in the crowd shouted, "this is a truly great miracle! Anyone who has this power must be able to do other amazing things. Let this man Jesus be our king! He talks about the kingdom of heaven, he talks about his kingdom. Let's make him our king because he has amazing power."

Jesus replied shaking his head, "that's not the type of king that I am. My kingdom isn't determined by national boundaries, but by the transformation of people's hearts. It's not external, it's internal."

But they wouldn't listen. They wanted a king to come and overthrow the Roman rule of Israel. They wanted their nation back as the prophet Isaiah had promised so long ago. They wanted to have their identity back as free people and they wanted Jesus to do it. Perhaps they saw him as similar to Moses, who came and set them free from 400 years of captivity in Egypt. *He* performed miracles, he was good at magic, he was a prophet . . . Jesus had all the ingredients as far as they were concerned and they really wanted him to be their king.

They were wrong. Jesus was not the quick fix that we all want him to be. He could have, but he didn't. He wanted the people to be drawn close to God. That was the first and foremost task on his agenda. And maybe this is where we get our perspective on pain and suffering wrong. Why would God take away from us the very vehicle that most often drives us closer to him?

And Jesus saw the crowd pressing in, with a fierce determination in their eyes. He needed to escape. The story goes that he sent the disciples off in their boat while he went away and withdrew by himself. Maybe the disciples were meant to be some kind of decoy to attract the attention of the crowd in order to give Jesus a chance to run for cover.

At any rate, Jesus gets away by himself for awhile. As the disciples are half way across the lake, they see Jesus walking out on water to meet them in the middle. Once they realise that Jesus is not a ghost, the disciples are impressed with this trick too and talked about it until they got to shore for the night.

The next day the crowds go to the hill where Jesus fed the 5,000 and didn't find him there. So they got in some boats and went across the lake in search of him.

When they found him they asked why he had left them behind.

Jesus saw right through them. "You come looking for me for one reason only. To get your fill. You want some free bread.

"You're not even interested in the miracle that got you the bread in the first place. Instead you are focussing on your stomachs.

"You don't get it do you. You still haven't seen past your nose. You are so consumed by what you think your needs are that you miss out on the important stuff. Do you need a new kitchen? Do you need to renovate? Do you need to be financially secure? Do you need these things?

"These aren't bad in themselves, but if you need to have you're spiritual appetites satisfied by earthly things, then you will miss out. If your worth and value is in these things that waste away and outdate, that become obsolete and worthless, then how much are you really worth? It's chasing the wind to 'find yourself' in lifestyle accessories.

"I am the bread of life. I have what you need to live—I mean *really* live. You may get the other stuff, but that's not the point, it's whether you are defined more by stuff than by me."

They asked him for some proof that he was a speaking with authority, quoting how God gave the Israelites bread from heaven in the story of the Exodus. How quickly they had forgotten that they had just witnessed a miracle the day before. They had forgotten the power of God in front of them, or was it that they just didn't recognise it?

How can we not recognise miracles? And there are many miracles around us. How can people be so blind to so many God given things? I want to suggest that we are distracted so easily by the things around us, by what we think we need, We are so distracted that we miss the miraculous gifts from God.

I know that I can get so consumed by my dissatisfaction with things or my lack of things, with the dilemmas of life's choices, with having to pay bills, having to make extra money to pay bills. I can get so distracted because at times I am dissatisfied with my lifestyle, it's so busy, so

unpredictable, so multifaceted, pulled in so many directions. I suffer from the condition of our times—to find my self-worth in quantity.

Our society is built around dissatisfaction. It is built around creating needs for us. It is built around creating deficiencies in us. You're too fat, unfit, un-tanned and middle-class. You don't have fun, adventure, romance, or interesting experiences. You need comfort, protection, security, insurance, private health care. You haven't lived until you've travelled, worked for a while, experienced love. You don't have enough, you need more, you need a bigger tv so you can watch these adverts bigger. You need better oral care, personal hygiene, shinier hair product—because you're worth it. Your music sucks, you need a home theatre, play station and X box with educational games for the kids. You need low quality sensationalist journalism, that isn't presented because you need to know, but because you need to satisfy your curiosity and tune in to the advertising.

At the end of it our society would break down if it did not create needs for us.

And Jesus says “No. That's all wrong. Those aren't real deficits, they aren't real needs. They just create more holes. I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

He's not talking about the physical, He's talking about the spiritual—a satisfied life is not found in mortgages but in searching out Jesus. And if you do that, your other needs will dissolve and become something else. You may still have a mortgage, but it is ruled by the rules of the kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus says, “I am the only thing that will satisfy you. You have so little face it. You really do. And the more things you think you have, the less you really have because they distract you away from me.

“Look past your perpetual appetite. Come to me. Be like the little boy that day I fed five thousand hungry people. He knew five loaves of bread and two fish wasn't enough to feed them. But he brought his tiny contribution . . . and look what I did next. Don't be afraid to risk.

Jesus says, “Bring what little you actually have, and watch me take it and perform miracles.”