

# **St. Ninian's Parish Church**

## **Sunday 4th August 2018**

*2 Kings 4: 42 - 44; John 6: 1 - 21*

*Almighty God, your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ is the light of the world. May your people, illuminated by your Word, shine with radiance of his glory, that his love may be known in the world as he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit one God, now and forever. Amen.*

At this year's Radio 2 Folk Awards - the BBC's annual celebration of folk music - the winner of the Album of the Year went to a trio from Stockton called The Young 'Uns, whose winning album, *Strangers*. *Strangers* is a celebration of true stories about inspiring people such as Hesham Modamani, a Syrian migrant who fled the war there, and swam a five mile straight of the Aegean Sea; a man, Matthew Ogston, who founded a foundation to tackle religious and cultural homophobia after his male partner committed suicide; and Sybil Phoenix who arrived in Britain in 1956 from British Guiana and who became the first black woman to be awarded the MBE.

The album also includes a song celebrating Bob Cooney. Bob Cooney was born in Aberdeen and fought against fascism in the Spanish Civil War as part of the International Brigade. The song dedicated to him celebrates the time when, during the Battle of the Ebro in 1938, Bob Cooney managed to feed the 57 hungry men in his charge with one tin of corned beef.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the song references Jesus' feeding of the 5,000, which we read about this morning in the Gospel of John. The song's title is *Bob Cooney's Miracle*, and it suggests that Bob Cooney's achievement was something of a religious experience for Bob Cooney and his hungry men. However, despite the title the song avoids claiming that this religious experience was miraculous or that it was a sign that said something special about Bob Cooney. It finishes with the lines,

*So if he can share with all us men, we can share the earth and start again*

*"Sharpen your knives" Bob Cooney said "Bring out your beef and bring out your bread!"*

*We can share the earth, we can start again.*

*Amen amen amen amen.<sup>1</sup>*

The line, 'So if he can share with all us men, we can share the earth and start again,' leaves the subject of the 'he' ambiguous. It is not clear whether it refers to Jesus or to Bob.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://genius.com/The-younguns-bob-cooneys-miracle-lyrics>

The traditional theological understanding of the feeding of the five thousand story as it is found in the Gospel John is that it is both a sign and a miracle. Jesus' feeding of the 5,000 is a sign that points to who Jesus is in John's Gospel - God himself - and, found at the beginning of this sixth chapter, it sets the scene for what we'll hear in this chapter in the weeks to come about Jesus' self-description as the bread of life.

Using imagery that recalls the Eucharistic meal, communion, in John chapter 6 Jesus describes how when people metaphorically feed on him - doing that symbolically when they share communion - then they find spiritual life-giving bread that has enduring nourishment rather than the bread of this world that provides only temporary nourishment. Even Moses, Jesus argues in this chapter, could only feed people with perishable manna from heaven that didn't last. He, Jesus, is greater than Moses for he comes down from heaven and feeds us with bread that lasts forever.

This sign, that Jesus is God himself, and his declaration that belief in him provides nourishment that is eternal, is supported right at the beginning of the chapter by Jesus' demonstration of power through the miracle of feeding at least five thousand people with only five loaves and two fish. It is this manifestation of miraculous power that convinces the people that, in their words, Jesus 'Surely [must] be the prophet that was to come into the world.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John 6:14



Of course, they don't fully understand who Jesus is for John goes on to say that they want to 'seize him to proclaim him king'<sup>3</sup>. Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, he is the bread of life, not an earthly emperor, so he withdraws from the people 'to the hills' to avoid being seized.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John 6:15

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Much like the affect the feeding had on the crowd, ever since then the miracle and the theological implications of it have been understood as the most important part of this feeding story. However, in its retelling the theological understanding of this story, and the miraculous event too often overwhelm the human aspects of this story.

Jesus, after all, is God incarnate; he is not just God, he is also a human being. As such, the human nature of this story is just as important as the theological understanding. The social implications revealed when 5,000 people are fed with so little are just as important as the theological implications revealed by the miraculous feeding.

If this story is intended to help us to understand that Jesus' is God, then Jesus wants us to understand that God is present with us, feeding and nourishing us. This story doesn't encourage us to believe that our God is a an all-powerful remote divinity, separate from us, and who, when people believe in him, acts in our lives in miraculous ways.

Instead, this story encourages us to believe that our God is in fact a very close and loving presence in our earthly, human lives, who, when we believe in him, feeds us in very real ways. And, far from being all-powerful, when the crowd try to seize him, he runs away from power (ultimately, of course, to suffering on the cross). This is a God who is not a remote, all-powerful miracle worker, but a close, loving, all-suffering God.

The story of Bob Cooney is not the only story about soldiers being fed in wartime. The Greek Economist Yanis Varoufakis was the Greek Minister of Finance in 2015 who led negotiations with Greece's creditors during the Greek government-debt crisis. In his book about the history of capitalism called *Talking to My Daughter About the Economy*, which he wrote to explain economics to his daughter, professor Varoufakis uses the work of Richard Radford to explain market economics.

Richard Radford was a British economist and was a Prisoner of War from 1941. He described the various ways that Red Cross parcels, which arrived in the prisoner of war camp stimulated amongst the prisoners a market economy in coffee, tea and chocolate amongst other things, with cigarettes acting as currency. Red Cross parcels that were meant to give everyone the same became part of an economy that helped distribute goods depending on what people wanted or needed.

The different stories of Bob Cooney and Richard Radford, one story about feeding a crowd with little, and one story about distributing what little there is to a crowd, show us that we should not think that we are always at the mercy of forces that are beyond our power to influence; remote, impersonal, all powerful forces. Instead, we can choose to influence our circumstances, and those choices are often moral choices that have implications for others and ourselves.



In his recently published biography of the father of modern economics Adam Smith, Jesse Norman reminds his readers that even this great exponent of markets believed that the invisible hand in markets does not necessarily deliver the best outcome. The very first sentence of Smith's book "The Theory of Moral Sentiments" reads:

*However selfish man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it.*

The Gospel message is many things, but through apparent miracles such as the feeding of 5,000 people, a sign that points to the divine identity of Jesus Christ, the message is not just that there is a God in heaven who can do wonderful and powerful things in the world and whom in another age we might meet, but that there is a God who is very close to us in this world and who when we believe in the presence of this God in our lives calls us to follow him by recognising that we have choices, and that we should act in ways that help to build his kingdom here in this world today.

*Now to the one who can keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory, jubilant and above reproach, to the only God our saviour, be glory and majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and for evermore. Amen.*