

Feeding of the 5000

Chocolat is a 2000 romance film, based on a novel by the English author, Joanne Harris. *Chocolat* tells the story of Vianne Rocher, played by Juliette Binoche, who arrives in the fictional French village of Lansquenot-sous-Tannes at the beginning of Lent with her six-year-old daughter, Anouk. She opens a small chocolaterie. Soon, she and her chocolate influence the lives of the townspeople of this repressed French community in different and interesting ways.¹



Armande, played by Judi Dench, is Vianne's elderly landlady, who is not allowed to see her grandson Luc, as she is a "bad influence", according to her daughter Caroline. Vianne arranges for him and his grandmother to meet in the chocolaterie, where they bond.



Vianne develops a friendship with Josephine, who is being physically abused by her husband Serge, the local café owner. Through their friendship, Josephine finds the courage to leave Serge after he beats her, moving in with Vianne and Anouk. As she works at the chocolate shop and learns the craft, her confidence slowly increases.

A band of river gypsies camp near the village. Although most of the town objects to their presence, Vianne embraces them. At Vianne's instigation, they hold a birthday party for Armande with villagers on the gypsy's boat. When Caroline sees Luc dancing with his grandmother, she begins to accept that Armande's influence in her son's life may be positive.



The arrival of Vianne and Anouk into this quaint French village was unexpected, especially since they opened a chocolate shop during Lent, the time of year everyone there was fasting. Yet in a short time, Vianne's generosity was abundant and her grace was extraordinary, which led to transformation in the hearts and minds and lives of the villagers.

Christ Jesus performed such unexpected, extraordinary and abundant works as no one has done before or since. His miracles were numerous, public, full of mercy and compassion, and were all performed by His own power and in His own name.

Let us consider the miracle of the loaves and fishes and, in so doing, learn how we might both *have* similar 'feasts' and *provide* such 'feasts'.

Explanation

When Jesus heard about it, he withdrew from there by boat to a remote place to be alone. When the crowds heard this, they followed him on foot from the towns. (Matthew 14:13)²

In The Gospel according to Matthew, we have moved on from Jesus' parables in Matthew 13.

The setting of Matthew 14 begins with the puppet-king of the Jews, Herod the tetrarch, arresting and then executing John the Baptist. When Jesus heard about the death of his cousin, he “withdrew from there by boat to a remote place to be alone” (Mt 14:13). Why did he do this? More than likely because he wanted and needed to grieve.

When he went ashore, he saw a large crowd, had compassion on them, and healed their sick. (Matthew 14:14)

I am certain the news of John the Baptist’s execution would have circulated. They didn’t have social media then, but news always travels fast and John the Baptist was a religious celebrity. The crowd did not care that Jesus needed some time to be alone. All they could care about was their own condition, their own needs. Seeing them, Jesus put aside his own grief because he had compassion for the crowd. He put aside his own need for compassion to heal their sick.

It is because of stories like this that no one will deny Jesus was a great man. How much we yearn for leaders and examples such as he in our day and age. Who among us will step up to lead the way in following Jesus example?

When evening came, the disciples approached him and said, “This place is deserted, and it is already late. Send the crowds away so that they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” (Matthew 14:15)

With that background in mind, notice the timing of the miracle. The evening had come, it was late, meaning, literally, the time for the evening meal had passed. Jesus had been healing and teaching the people. The crowd had been so deeply interested in what he was doing among them, they forgot the needs of their body. Everyone was likely starting to take notice of their hunger.

Notice also the location of the miracle. It was “a deserted place”. Had they been near a city or village, they could have easily obtained food for themselves, a miracle would have been unnecessary.

Christ Jesus never performed superfluous miracles. The need of the moment made it necessary that He should demonstrate he could provide for the people in the wilderness.

Does this remind you of God providing manna, quail and water for the ancient Israelites in the wilderness? Does it remind you of the great feast God is preparing for his people on the day of the Lord? It should.

We should not be surprised at the anxiety of the disciples. They wanted to dismiss the people so they could go and find themselves some food in the villages. This was considerate and humane. They too wanted to procure some food for themselves, for they were also hungry.

We should never forget we all have bodies as well as souls. If we see a brother or a sister, or even a neighbour, in hunger and we feel no compassion for them, how can we say the love of God is in us? (Jam 2:14-17)

“They don’t need to go away,” Jesus told them. “You give them something to eat.” “But we only have five loaves and two fish here,” they said to him. (Matthew 14:16-17)

Now notice the surprising reply of Jesus: “They don’t need to go away”.

By that time, the crowd was obviously hungry, and reasonably so, but “man must not live on bread alone” (Lk 4:4). Not only was the promised Messiah of God in their midst, but that Messiah was the God of nature and providence. As the Messiah, Jesus’ heart was full of compassion and so his hands were open for supplying every living thing with every good thing.³ With that attitude and heart-orientation, Jesus directed the disciples to provide from whatever they possessed.

Did he really think the disciples would have enough on hand to feed this crowd? Most certainly not. Nor was it likely there was enough on hand amongst the crowd to feed everyone. Five loaves and two fishes were all that could be found. How totally inadequate this was to meet the demands of that hungry multitude. A true miracle would be necessary.

“Bring them here to me,” he said. Then he commanded the crowds to sit down on the grass. (Matthew 14:18–19a)

Jesus then commanded his disciples to bring the bread and fish to him. He did not scorn nor dismiss the meagreness of what was available, but made these elements the catalyst or the seed, as it were, of the abundance which he was about to provide. The hands of the disciples could do little with the loaves and fishes at that point; therefore, Jesus received them so that his almighty power might be employed upon them.

Next, Jesus commanded the crowd to sit down that all might be done in order, that the number of people might be accurately ascertained, and that all might be easily and fully supplied with the provision.

He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he blessed them. He broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. Everyone ate and was satisfied. They picked up twelve baskets full of leftover pieces. (Matthew 14:19b–20)

Then notice, Jesus’ conduct with respect to the bread and fish. He took it, lifted up his eyes to heaven, gave thanks, blessed the elements, and broke the bread. What an example of piety and devotion! How anxious he was to acknowledge and glorify His Father! What majesty and glory would be seen in the face and actions of Jesus on this occasion!

Jesus could have been flippant with his authority, as he was tempted to do so in the wilderness by Satan (Mt 4:1ff). He could have been ostentatious with his power, but he chose instead to set an example of humility and love.

That was Jesus’ attitude, but notice also his action in how he had the elements distributed: He gave the food to his disciples, who then gave it to the people. In this Jesus exhibited his leadership and authority, yet in his action recommended his disciples to the people, for he delegated to them the responsibility to distribute the elements, as leaders within the Kingdom.

Pay attention now to the creation and multiplication of the food which took place. Jesus prayed over the meagre and insufficient food, then passed portions to the disciples. The disciples then moved among the crowd and passed out from the portion they possessed. Where along this process the food multiplied is not to be known. Our concern is only that this little food became a lot, a single person’s meal became an abundance, such that 5,000 men, besides likely as many more women and children, everyone ate and was satisfied.

While our scripture focus does not say so explicitly, we can imagine Jesus then said, “Gather up the fragments, that nothing be lost.” And twelve baskets of fragments remained! He did

not do this to prove that many thousand times more than the initial loaves and fish was produced! God is the source of abundance, but he will not sanction extravagance or waste.

In this story, the generosity and grace of Christ Jesus our Lord was demonstrated. He set an example for the disciples and for us. How then might we put the lessons of this miracle into action in our community and in our lives?

Application

My previous reflections on the parables of Matthew 13 may have left you feeling, “How could my life and faith be unexpected, extraordinary and abundant?” This story of the feeding of 5000 itself certainly qualifies as unexpected, extraordinary and abundant, yet it also demonstrates how your ordinary life and simple faith can become unexpected, extraordinary and abundant, exactly as God intended.

A Community of Abundance

In the people of this story we see a striking representation of the moral condition of the human family, then as now. We live in a desert world —starving for life, light and love— having no human means of supply, yet we are drawn to any glimpse or promise of satisfaction.

In the provision of loaves and fish in this story we see a true example of the blessings of the good news about the kingdom. The source of these blessings is Jesus. He prepared for his disciples and the crowd a feast! At first, the elements appeared insufficient, yet their abundance was inexhaustible. This meal was free and cheap, we might say; it required no money, for it had no price. Then, as now, the feast the Lord prepares is satisfying for those who taste and see, for they are filled.

In the distribution of this feast we see the community of the friends of Jesus at their best. Then, as now, we come to Jesus with what little we have. He takes it and blesses it, with humility and love, and hands it back to be dispersed to a dying world. We offer; Christ provides; we then distribute the unexpected and extraordinary abundance.

We are not a room of spectators, but an ordered and intentional community of participants. We offer what little we have when we can. We are helpers and leaders in a variety of ministries —children’s ministry, administration, hospitality, prayer, Connect groups, Forge fellowship and outreach, music, production, worship presiding, welcoming, pastoral care, teaching— all of which, in their own way, contribute to our discipling one another around the table of the Lord.

Let’s take our Forge Kids ministry as an example. Steve and Amanda lead our Sunday school, ably assisted by Aidan and Rebekah. These four provide the teaching. Other helpers assist in managing the class, which disciplines our children from ages 5–12. In just 2½ years, we have grown from 2 children to almost 20, when they all show up.

It is imperative we have enough volunteers to disciple these children. They need to hear the good news about Jesus, be encouraged to follow his commands, and be equipped to follow his example, for the world is actively trying to undermine this healthy foundation of humility and love and service. How will they know and experience the feast of faith without someone preparing the table for them?

You may think you do not have anything to offer, that you could not be of any service to the children of our community. Remember what Jesus did with five loaves and two fish, a

meagre and insufficient meal that fed thousands miraculously. Children need to know they are loved and cared for, that they have a contribution and that they can make a difference. They need a safe haven. They need to learn to worship, to love and to serve. This does not happen accidentally. This community of faith can rally around the families who come within our sphere of influence. We can show them the unexpected, the extraordinary and the abundant, thus giving them a grander vision of light and life and love, from God's perspective.

Together we enjoy the feast the Lord prepares and provides, and our lives are richer for it. They are free, full and forever.

A Sanctuary of Abundance

Each of us have a part to play in each other's life and faith. We can only give what we have ourselves received. And remember our Creator always intended this feast to be shared.

In the movie *Chocolat*, the character, Vianne, was compelled by the wind to take her daughter and set up her shop in a new location. She did not prepare and sell chocolates with the express purpose of changing lives, yet that is precisely what happened as she shared the fruit, or should I say truffle, of her labour. The chocolate shop became the venue for feasting, where villagers and gypsies could be brought to peace with one another and joy was shared.



Each of us can take the truffle of the Spirit we have received —the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23a)— and share that in our homes, our schools, our clubs, our teams, our workplaces, our third places. The world will try and convince those are not the characteristics that succeed, but the lust of the flesh and of the eyes, and the pride in one's possessions (1 Jn 2:16) do not build up but destroy!

Share your truffles! Invite others to feast with you, strangers and friends alike. In providing such moments of feasting, you just may participate in a miracle. Your offering to a sick and dying world will be received by the Lord and miraculously transformed into something unexpected, extraordinary and abundant, feeding others physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and spiritually.

Conclusion

This story of Christ Jesus feeding 5000 was unexpected, extraordinary and abundant works. All of his miracles were numerous, public, full of mercy and compassion, and were all performed by His own power and in His own name.

Let us follow his example by relying on his power and we too may perform miracles in his name.

Endnotes

- 1 Adapted from a sermon outline provided by Jabez Burns, "The Miracles of the Loaves and Fishes", *Sermon Outlines on the Life of Christ*, ed. Al Bryant (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Kregel Publications, 1993), pg 56.
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 3 See 1Kg 3:13; Mt 6:33; 19:28; Mk 10:29; Lk 18:29; 1Tm 4:8; Jam 1:17.