

THE PACKED LUNCH FACTORY

A RETELLING OF THE STORY OF THE FEEDING
OF THE FIVE THOUSAND

PART OF THE 'ONLY A BOY' SERIES

Every step I took led me further up the steep hillside. I was surrounded by many other people as we walked through the fields, filled with long, sweet-smelling meadow-grass and colourful, wild flowers. Grazing in the long vegetation, sheep and goats moved aside to allow the people to pass and I said "hello" to the few shepherds and goat-herders who were tending them. Far below, lay the quiet waters of Lake Tiberias, stretching towards the Jordanian mountains on the east horizon, The early morning shadows were dissolving in the brightening sunlight. There was little wind on the lake that day and the towns on the far side reflected clearly on the mirrored surface of the water.

It was springtime in the year AD32. We were in the Galilee area following a man they called the 'new Rabbi'. He was ahead of us on the climb, together with his group of friends. Everyone was very excited because he was quite different to anyone else we had ever known. People told of being cured of their diseases and sicknesses, just by speaking with him. Some said he must be a prophet, but the last of those lived around 400 years ago. Others said he may be the promised Messiah – someone they hoped might free Israel from the Roman Armies that had invaded, from the harsh rules they imposed. Either way, although he didn't look anything special, he attracted a lot of attention and people followed him everywhere.

I was only a boy. My name was Joshua and I was twelve years old. I didn't understand all the talk about a Messiah, but I had lots of questions about this man. Who was he, for a start? Why was he doing what he was doing? Why was he in Galilee when he had been born in Bethlehem, far away to the south? How did he heal sick people? Did he think he was a special messenger? If so, what message was he delivering?

To my left, I saw another huge crowd approaching, including a large number of local church leaders and priests. They were easy to spot because of their fancy clothes and the group of followers that surrounded them.

Mostly, the crowd was full of ordinary people like me who were curious about this new Rabbi and his teachings, excited by the things he did.

The church leaders had come to listen and debate with him. When they taught from the scriptures, they often added more and more rules which made people feel controlled. This Rabbi didn't do that.

Some people chatted loudly nearby. 'Where had he learned to speak so well? He hadn't studied with the scripture scholars, had he? Where did he get his knowledge from? 'No idea! I heard he was just a carpenter from Nazareth, not even from an important family. His dad owned Joe's Wood Yard, I think.' I looked at his hands and saw that they were strong. Some of his nails were broken, as if he had worked hard for years, and his skin was bit rough.

Yet when he touched people, especially the children, he was incredibly gentle and kind. Maybe it was his ordinariness that helped him to get on with the local people, but he certainly seemed to annoy the priests and was sometimes quite hard when he spoke to them.

Suddenly, there was a huge commotion. A man and his friends barged through the crowd. They were shouting loudly "Rabbi, can you cure this man's blindness?" 'This should be interesting,' I thought. I had been told that he could heal people, but never seen anything for myself. Not knowing whether I believed he could do it or not, I was suddenly very attentive.

The doctors certainly couldn't do anything for him. What made the man's friends think this Rabbi could? The church leaders were watching closely too. Normally, illnesses like blindness were thought to be signs that the person had lived a bad life, or their parents had. The priests might suggest a lot of praying, crying and offering sacrifices and money at the temple or a number of other things. They hoped that this might make God listen to them, but even then, blindness tended to stay that way... blind!

The Rabbi smiled warmly, comforting and re-assuring the man, before gently leading him to one side. As the man looked up wondering what was about to happen, the Rabbi held him by his hands then spat in both of his eyes. Yuk! The man staggered backwards. 'What did you do that for?' someone shouted from the crowd. The man's friends were stunned!

'That's horrible! Rude!' The church leaders were not impressed and felt that this proved the Rabbi couldn't be from God.

Spit dribbled down the man's cheeks and his eyes were wet with tears. He was confused and disappointed. Slowly, he wiped the slimy mess off his face and dried his eyes on the sleeve of his cloak. Then to everyone's surprise, he screamed out 'I can see! I can see!' 'I see things like trees, walking!' 'Is that what people look like?'

There was a huge gasp in the crowd. The Rabbi spoke to him again and suddenly his eyes were completely clear and he could see perfectly.

Incredible! He had perfect vision for the first time in his life. Now tears of joy welled up in his eyes, spilling over and gushing like a waterfall down his cheeks.

He jumped up and down with excitement. He was laughing and hugging his friends, pointing at everything around him, but the church leaders were just staring at the Rabbi. Such awful behaviour was really ungodly, or so they thought, and they looked down their noses at him. I didn't understand.

"Why couldn't they be happy for the blind man who could now see? He wasn't thinking about behaviour, after all, he used to be blind.

Now it was as if someone had opened the curtains. He was ecstatic!"

If ever there was a way to get a man healed, no-one could have dreamed of spitting in his face! But he could see again and everyone was amazed. No wonder crowds followed this Rabbi. He started to speak.

Sssh! A hush fell over the crowd.

'Why do you look at the speck of dust in someone else's eye and completely miss the plank of wood in your own?' A ripple of laughter went round the crowd as people imagined walking around with breadboards for eyelids. What a strange thing to say.

The church leaders weren't so amused! They knew the meaning behind his question and felt it was directed at them. 'And if someone demands that you pay back what you owe them by giving them your cloak, give them your pants as well!' Ha-ha! What a joke! Imagine someone forcing you to give up your cloak. If you gave them your underwear too, you would end up running about starkers! It would shame the person who had demanded so much from you, that they would probably return both your cloak and pants very quickly.

'Brilliant!' This Rabbi taught about people's hidden attitudes instead of giving them another list of rules. The other Rabbis were perplexed. This man claimed to speak for God but he taught them stories and with examples, rather than preaching the Holy Scriptures.

They had completely missed the point! When he used the scriptures, it was to teach about His Father's love, making the verses relevant. The crowd loved him for it, but I was sure that the priests were envious of his popularity. They were very critical of his teaching methods.

While I was thinking about all this, I realised that I needed the loo. That's not easy in a field full of thousands of people! However, I spotted a small rock to hide behind. It could give me a little privacy and spare my blushes. Then I laughed. Imagine the queue, if everyone needed the loo at the same time?

Re-emerging, I pushed my way back to the front of the crowd, to see what was happening. Being small had its advantages, sometimes. The Rabbi was still speaking...

'Give to those who ask. Do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.'

'Don't worry about food or drink. Look at the flowers around you – where do you think they get such beautiful clothes? God will take care of all your needs too.'

With such simple words, talking about everyday things, the Rabbi made his teaching very easy to listen to. No wonder people liked listening – it wasn't complicated, but it still showed up things that really needed to change.

Right then, not far away, a bell sounded. People turned to see a man standing about 100 metres away. He was leaning on a stick, wearing torn clothes and his hair was filthy. His feet were heavily bandaged with scabby linen strips. He was a leper!

No! That was really bad news. No-one wanted him around. 'Keep away!' someone shouted out in panic. Leprosy is extremely contagious and anyone who has it is forbidden by law to mix with other people. The crowd was suddenly frightened, especially the women with their children. They hoped that the man was downwind of them.

'If you are willing...?' His voice tailed off, as if he was embarrassed and had forgotten what he wanted to say.

The Rabbi walked towards him smiling. Then he called out loudly, 'I am – be clean!' Immediately the man knew that he was cured, but there was a growing murmur among the church leaders because the Rabbi had used God's special Name when he said 'I am' to the man. That was not allowed – that Name was never ever used. Then he told the man 'Go and show yourself to the priests.' Whenever someone was healed of such a disease, a priest had to agree that he had been cured. That was the law. Well, there are a load of priests here, I thought. Why not sort it out right now?

No-one volunteered. Instead, the priests quickly dived for cover, pretending not to notice. So, the man went off to find the priest from his home town. The Rabbi let him go but also watched accusingly as the church leaders slowly reappeared. He had brilliantly put them on the spot!

I mulled over what I had just seen. Why did the Rabbi go to meet the man? No-one ever went near lepers. How could he cure such a bad disease just by speaking words? How was he so sure the man would be healed? Why wouldn't one of the church leaders pronounce him clean in front of everyone? Why did they hide? Didn't they believe that God could heal the man? Why were they so angry with this Rabbi for using God's Name? Surely if God hadn't been happy about it, the man wouldn't have been healed.

Anyway, by then it was mid afternoon. One of his friends, Philip, suggested that they tell everyone to go to the local villages for food or 'bed and breakfast' at a local inn. Many people were far from home and everyone was hungry.

"Food! Great idea!"

I had been so engrossed in all that had happened, I had forgotten to eat my lunch. Suddenly my stomach reminded me with a loud, embarrassing rumble. It was one of those squirmy, squiggly sounds that everyone near me heard. They all laughed! I went red in the face!

The Rabbi answered Philip, but what he said was astonishing! 'You feed them, Philip!' Philip's eyes bulged as the words sank in. What are you saying Rabbi! What with?' he spluttered. 'Well, give them whatever you have,' came the reply. 'Even if we could manage it, between us all, it would take several months wages to buy enough food to go around. It's impossible!'

'Ah! With God all things are possible' said the Rabbi coolly. 'If you give what little you have and believe, you'll see God do amazing things.' Philip and his friends caught their breath. They weren't sure. They had no food, very little money and they didn't understand. They simply shook their heads. He was their Teacher and their friend, but sometimes what he asked of them left their heads spinning.

So the Rabbi suggested that they ask whether anyone else had food. They began to investigate.

'I've got my own lunch' I thought, but no-one else near me seemed to have any. So, after a while, his friends were still empty-handed. 'Give what you have to those who ask...' I remembered his teaching. 'But it is such a tiny amount, not much to give - what good could that do?' 'Besides, it was my lunch!' 'If I gave it away, I'd have nothing left. What would I eat?'

I argued with my feelings for a while, not sure of what to do. In the end, I called out 'I have something you can have.' Andrew, a tall man with a kind face and dark beard looked towards me, then at the food I was holding. 'Don't take the kid's food!' someone shouted from among the crowd nearby.

I looked at Andrew and nodded. 'I want to give what I have! It isn't much, but you can have it all!'

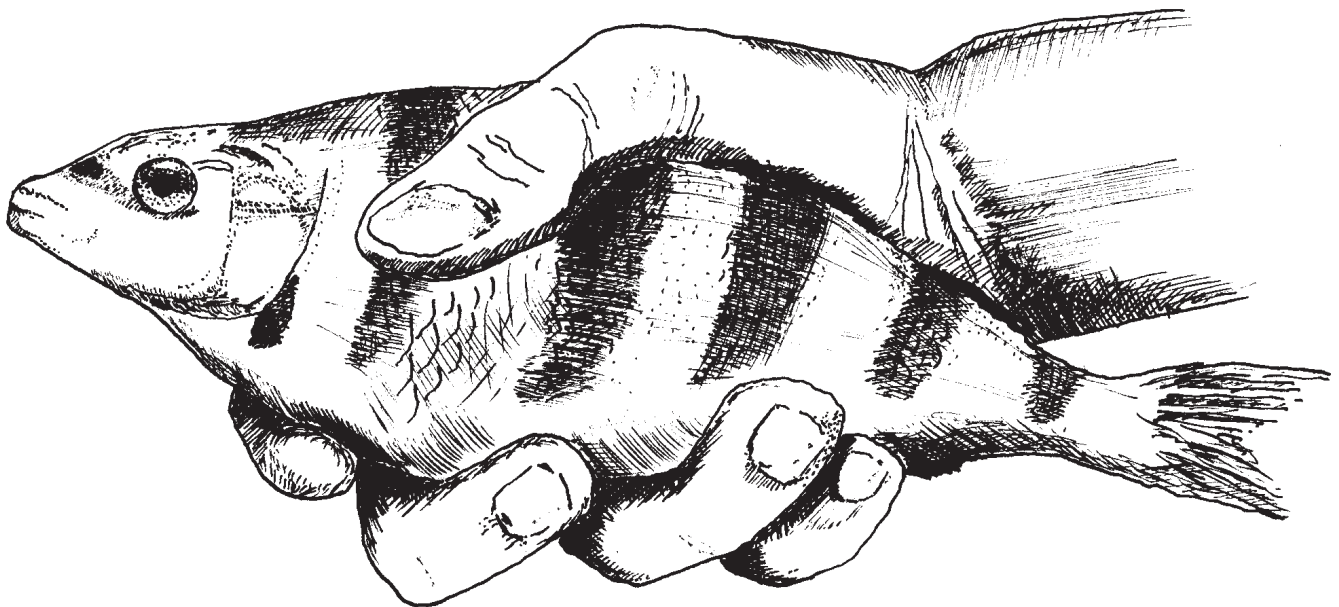
The Rabbi smiled and thanked me, his weathered face full of kindness. Then he waved to Andrew, urging him to accept it and take it to him. Holding my lunch up to the sky, he thanked God for it. Then he told his friends to sit everybody down in groups of about fifty people in each.

There was a twinkle in the Rabbi's eyes and a wide smile on his face. He was up to something I could tell, and I was eager to see what he would do with my food. It took a while for everyone to sit down. People jostled for position, preferring to sit in their chosen groups.

At the time, who you were or what you believed influenced who you would eat with and, importantly, who you would not. The leaders and priests all sat together, separate from the poor people, which was their normal behaviour. Perhaps they felt they were better than everyone else, that their conversation was more important. It seemed to me that this attitude didn't match what the Rabbi was saying about caring for the poor or wanting to help them.

The Rabbi gave a fish and a roll to Philip and told him to give it to the nearest group which was ours. Then he gave another fish and a roll to Andrew, another fish and a roll to Peter and another of each to John. 'How could that be?' I thought. I knew that there were only two fish and five loaves. He had just given four fish away and was in the process of giving away a fifth to James. I rubbed my eyes!

The same thing happened in our group. I was handed a roll and a fish, but when I passed them to the man beside me, I still somehow had a roll and a fish in my left hand! My eyes nearly popped out of my head! "How did that happen?" I was speechless! I tried it again, watching really carefully. The same thing happened again. "That's impossible!" I didn't feel anything happen, but it just had.



As fast as people were passing fish out, more appeared in their place. Everyone was laughing with amazement. It was crazy! Now there were hundreds of fish and loads of bread rolls and still the Rabbi was handing out more.

I made up a joke.

Q. 'What do you get if you give 'my lunch' to the Rabbi?'

A. 'Mylunch,mylunch,mylunch,mylunch,mylunch,mylunch,mylunch...He had just invented fast food!'

'I am the Bread of Life!' he said as he continued to hand out food. People were too busy eating to argue. It was like a packed lunch factory.

I wondered what mum would think if I told her that her five small rolls had just fed thousands of people. It didn't matter who was who – everyone got the same...my lunch! Rich and poor, young and old... my lunch! This Rabbi mixed with everyone and treated them all the same. He wasn't trying to impress anyone. He wasn't trying to prove anything. He wanted to make people think and to inspire them – to lift them up, not put them down. It was quite a change from the rather snobby teachers in the synagogue who were trying to build up their reputations.

Being near him made me think about how I lived my life.

People around me obviously felt the same and were deep in conversation with each other as a result. I remembered stories about God being among his people and feeding them with manna in the wilderness – it must have been a bit like this. "Wow!" So much for not having enough! His twelve friends all collected a basketful of food each. Everyone had eaten loads! Everyone was completely amazed!

Finally, with everyone full and happy, the Rabbi sent his friends away down the hillside to get their boat ready at the Lake. They headed off towards Bethsaida. Then he told the people that he needed to be alone, to pray.

I thanked him before racing downhill after his friends. Bethsaida was where I lived, and it was getting dark. What a great day!

I couldn't wait to tell my mum.