

# Seeing Beyond

Reflections on art and Christian faith

## *The Five Thousand* Eularia Clarke



Oil on canvas laid down on board, 1962

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These five thousand are not to be found in 1st century Palestine, but somewhere in mid-20th century Britain. Bread and fish have become fish and chips. The preacher isn't Jesus, but a vicar standing in a stone pulpit bizarrely transplanted from a church to the middle of a field. Bikes lie discarded by the side and water for tea is being boiled.

This painting reminds me of the paintings by Pieter Bruegel. Partly because of the colour palate used, but also because centre-stage are ordinary people, totally oblivious to the fact that they are being painted, each group forming its own little cameo. Some are listening raptly as they eat their meal. Others are preoccupied with making tea or feeding their children. Others again are completely distracted or simply having a little nap.

And so the miracle of 5000 portions of fish and chips having arrived seemingly out of nowhere fades into the background and instead we are left wondering who all these people are and why they have come along. Do they genuinely want to hear what the preacher has to say? Are they here out of habit? Or because they had nothing better to do? Or because they had heard that something exciting was going to happen?

As a lay preacher myself, I can't help seeing my congregations here, wondering what has drawn them to come to church on a particular Sunday. What concerns and worries, what joys or fears, what needs and desires have they brought with them? What do they hope for, what do I hope for when attending a service? Are we ready to be surprised by a miracle? Are we ready to connect with God? Are we ready for God to feed our inner being with spiritual food? Or do we sit there longing for it and somehow feeling that we are left out and never get our portion of fish and chips; never experience the miracle of knowing ourselves loved and accepted by God, excited and inspired to listen out for God and go on a journey with God?

These people seem to treat their fish and chips as perfectly normal, as though they had expected it to be provided. Or has the initial astonishment, excitement and joy at finding that there was enough for everyone simply faded? Some, now, are drawn to listen to the preacher while others have responsibilities, needs and desires which stop them from engaging. How can we keep alive our desire to follow God when all the rest of life crowds in on us? How do we keep ourselves focussed, not on whoever the preacher may be, but on Jesus? How can we keep our hearts and minds open, listening for God in the words of a preacher, in one another, in the places we least expected God to be?

## Biblical References

The feeding of the five thousand ([Matthew 14:13-21](#), [Mark 6:30-44](#), [Luke 9:10-17](#), [John 6:1-14](#))