

The Detox of our Nuremberged Imaginations

Sermon for the 9th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 2 August 2020

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Isaiah 55: 1-5; Psalm 145: 8-9, 14-21; Romans 9: 1-8; Matthew 14: 13-21

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Today's gospel is scene 2 in a little drama of contrasts, here in Matthew Chapter 14, and we can't fully appreciate this scene 2 unless we recall scene 1 that precedes it. Remember Herod Antipas, more fixated on John the Baptist than President Trump is on Dr Anthony Fauci. Scene 1 is all about unhealthy sovereign power and contempt for what God wants in the situation. There's Herod's outrageous bragging promise to the dancing step-daughter, with more than a whiff of incest in the air, then things escalate mimetically and the meal takes a grisly turn, with John the Baptist butchered off-stage and his head brought in on a platter. That's scene 1—it might be out of 'Game of Thrones', or 'Ozark', or from any one of many hellholes in the real world, far or near.

In light of this scene 1, we can now understand scene 2 in today's gospel. There we find ourselves at a different meal, with a different

host. Jesus sees that his many guests are generously fed and cared for, enlisting his disciples' help. Compare this with the murderous sexual and political tension of Herod's banquet in scene 1, climaxing in a blood sacrifice. Nothing of the sort here in scene 2, where the new creation is revealed in all its alternative, humanising graciousness.

And of course this miracle story is more than a great episode in the history of catering. It's an imaginative picture of God's alternative reality. It looks back in its imagery to God feeding Israel in the wilderness with manna from heaven, from Israel's dreamtime narrative of the Exodus. And it looks forward to the last supper, hence to the Eucharist that we celebrate. Jesus' cross has exposed and defeated the whole politics of blood sacrifice, from Herod to Hiroshima and beyond. His resurrection puts the power and threat and fear of death on notice, so that humans can learn to relax with one another and to relax with God—the time of violent assertion and scarcity and self-preservation is over. Today's gospel is an Easter banquet in advance, and our invitation came with our baptism.

Isaiah in our first reading today gives us an earlier version of the same party, with a wonderful spread, plenty to drink, and all at no cost. His God is getting the band back together; Israel and its King are bringing a different vision of nation and politics back into a world, no

longer overshadowed by violent domination and exile. As ever our psalm echoes and reinforces the mood of our Old Testament reading—and Psalm 145 today does not disappoint us, with its beautiful hymn of confidence in God’s promises. The same confidence extends to St Paul in Romans today who, while lamenting a falling away among his own people Israel, still clings firm to God’s promise. Paul knows that Israel is failing, but according to God’s promise its future is secure in Jesus Christ—the same promise, Paul tells us today, that once prevailed despite Abraham’s barren marriage, and then again despite the barren marriage of his son Isaac.

So, friends, here in the Church and here in the Eucharist, we embody and we celebrate a counter-story, a counter-politics, and a counter-liturgy. Our scene 2 with Jesus as host offers a clear contrast to business as usual as hosted by Herod and all his ilk—to the all-too-familiar scene 1 world of bragging, lust and murder. We’re called to imbibe this scene 2 vision, and a proven way to do this is by adopting the practice of contemplation that Fr Martin commended last week. James Alison refers to contemplation as a political action, which he describes as “the detox of our Nuremberged imaginations”. They certainly needed a bit of that imaginative detox at Herod’s

banquet, before everything went to custard. And here we find our Christian calling: to develop our Eucharistic imagination, so we can join Jesus' disciples making the scene 2 of today's gospel come alive in the midst of our scene 1 world. This is the Church's mission in a nutshell—to inhabit the Eucharistic imagination in the midst of a non-Eucharistic world, and so we become genuinely transformative agents in that world.

The Lord be with you ...