

Very Different Miracles in the Wilderness

Sermon for the 10th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 6 August 2023

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.

On today's date, August 6th, 78 years ago, an atomic bomb dropped out of a clear blue sky to explode over Hiroshima, a major military target but also a civilian one. Over a hundred thousand people perished either immediately from the blast, in the subsequent firestorm or soon after from the effects of radiation.

No wonder the Japanese have not welcomed the release of *Oppenheimer*, Christopher Nolan's new film about the father of the atomic bomb, the so-called American Prometheus, J. Robert Oppenheimer. This brilliant theoretical physicist might have been remembered for discovering black holes, in his 1930s work on the eventual gravitational collapse of massive stars. But instead, he was remembered for working his own miracle in the wilderness—the wilderness of remote New Mexico, at Los Alamos, where with a little enriched uranium and some innovative explosive triggers, he and his team released the massive forces of nuclear fission.

Oppenheimer could never clear his conscience thereafter, taking for his own the words of a Hindu divinity from ancient Sanskrit poetry: “I am become death, the destroyer of worlds”. Which is why today, on August 6th, as our Gospel reading gives us Jesus’s feeding of the five thousand, I draw a comparison between those two wilderness miracles—between the world that reliably brings violent death, and the world according to Jesus Christ, who brings liberated life; not the destroyer of worlds, then, but the liberator of worlds: “I am the resurrection and the life”, “... the saviour who has come into the world”.

I’ve said to you before that the feeding of the five thousand isn’t about Jesus as the all-time champion of catering. Instead, it’s a literary tribute to what the earliest Christians had discovered Jesus to be. Here was the God of the Old Testament present in the person of Jesus—the one who fed the people of the Exodus with manna from heaven during their long wilderness sojourn now gathers and feeds and reassures his people once again. The one who generously and freely gives good things to God’s people, as Isaiah testifies today, is now demonstrating that through the ministry of Jesus. The God celebrated in today’s psalm, who opens wide his hand and fills all things living with his bounteous gift, is the God we meet today in Jesus Christ. This feeding in the wilderness testifies to who Jesus

Christ is from God—not just the teacher and moral guide that so many today are content with, but no less than God with us, God become truly human. And around this God incarnate a new community is being formed—a community freed to live beyond scarcity, envy, rivalry and violence. The few ingredients to hand are shared, and from those simple things a new world is built.

And, friends, the Eucharist that we share, with its simple elements of bread and wine, extends this miracle of Jesus into the future. So, you and I too are gathered and fed, until at last we come to the heavenly banquet that this miraculous feeding prefigures, which Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson has called “the universal Easter of the cosmos”.

Now, who wouldn't draw a comparison between this vision and so much human business as usual? As for Oppenheimer's miracle in the wilderness, a dreadful pall has been cast over history subsequently, which may yet bring humanity to its end. We can perhaps acknowledge the frighteningly clear-eyed realism of those who decided to drop that bomb—the alternative was invading Japan at near-unimaginable cost, with Australia up to its neck in that—so that only irresistible force could convince a fanatical enemy that surrender was its only option. We may be willing to acknowledge all that, drawing a veil of prudent statecraft over the actual horrors of

August 6th, then of August 9th in Nagasaki. But the actual horrors remain, as a testimony to how different things are in the world from how God intends them to be.

And indeed, the very presentation of today's gospel passage makes this point. The feeding of the five thousand in Matthew's Gospel follows directly after another meal, Herod's horrible banquet, in which John the Baptist's head was brought out on a platter. The comparison is intentional, it's there for us to draw. Jesus is making a different world, and enlisting us in it, in the face of how humanity prefers things to go—from Herod to Hitler to whoever next.

It would be a pity, then, to be given the opportunity to follow Jesus and his alternative from God, his Eucharistic alternative to the world's business as usual, and to dismiss it, to squander it. St Paul in our Romans reading today laments that his own Jewish people don't see it—failing to register that their old story with a gracious God has come to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. We might well share this lament over so many who remain unmoved today, even among Christians, who prefer authoritarian populism, aggrieved racism and embittered hoarding for their own advantage.

To his great credit Robert Oppenheimer became a committed opponent of using nuclear weapons, and especially of American

military hawks pressing to use nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union, so that he suffered greatly for it. It's never too late for people to choose. But if we resist the generous, liberating alternatives that our God presents to us, such as we see played out imaginatively in today's Gospel reading, as ever in the Eucharist we celebrate—opportunities to see and think and act differently—then humanity's future may indeed belong to that other divinity, the one Oppenheimer saw in the mirror—to “death, the destroyer of worlds”.

The Lord be with you ...