

“Give them something to eat yourselves”.

St Philip’s Anglican Church, O’Connor
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Matthew 14.13-21

As the Hebrew people struggled to rebuild their nation after 70 terrible years of exile and to ground that rebuilding on their religious tradition, the great prophet, whom we know as the Third Isaiah, reminded them of what their tradition was really about. Fasting was part of it, and yes, they were doing it. But what good was it doing them? All they were doing was squabbling and fighting amongst themselves. Is that what true fasting was about? Not exactly! Then he laid it on the line:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry . . . ?

What the prophet declared, Jesus enacts in the gospel: God’s will that hungry people be fed. Through Jesus’ action, we see God’s purpose: faithfully to sustain creation in anticipation of the new creation in which God’s reign is established in full and there is abundant food for all. Jesus’ action attacks the unjust system that ensures that the elite are well fed at the expense of the poor. Jesus enacts an alternative system marked by compassion, sufficiency and shared resources. In this morning’s gospel account of the feeding of the 5000, we encounter Jesus’ compassion for human need. We see in Jesus the transforming power of divine compassion and we see what it means to allow ourselves to be caught up in and changed by it.

There are many, some very complex, issues with which people struggle in our world now. In this country the debate about putting a price on carbon goes on relentlessly, and the proposal does not attract majority support. The collapse in support for pricing carbon can be traced back to the failure of the UN conference in Copenhagen. The next round of UN climate negotiations is scheduled for later this year, in Durban. Who knows whether any progress will be made!

However, the churches are trying to do their bit. The World Council of Churches with the Lutheran World Federation is inviting young Christians to Durban, in the context of that UN conference, to take part in a program that will address the links between environmental and socio-economic justice. In the months following, the participants will initiate and implement projects in their home countries on a volunteer basis.

The WCC has a long tradition of addressing the links between Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation. That was the name of an area of work given priority within the WCC back in 1983. Over the years the work has been applied and updated in regard to some of the most urgent global challenges, and today it finds expression in projects (i) that work for the preservation, responsible management and the equitable distribution of water for all; (ii) that promote the responsible care of the environment, believing that when creation is threatened, churches and Christians are called to speak out and act as an expression of their commitment to life, justice and love; (iii) that address the effects of climate change being experienced dramatically in some countries and regions of the world, particularly the Caribbean, Pacific, South East Asia and Africa, knowing that as the climate changes those who bear the burden disproportionately are the poor. That is most apparent at the moment in the Horn of Africa,

where the worst draught in six decades is threatening to be also a human tragedy of unimaginable proportions. Around the world, many churches work together to provide emergency relief to people facing such disaster, and we can contribute to that work through our NCC, that has launched an appeal.

In the gospel this morning, we encounter Jesus' compassion for human need. We see in Jesus the divine purpose for us to sustain creation faithfully and to build a just and equitable system that provides abundant food for all. We see in Jesus the transforming power of divine compassion and we see what it means to allow ourselves to be caught up in and changed by it. We know the story of the feeding in its broad outline well. It appears 6 times in the gospels in various forms — feeding 5,000, feeding 4,000. But Matthew has some particular emphases that speak to us in our context of world need.

The passage begins, 'Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew to a deserted place'. What Jesus has heard is a report of the death of John the Baptist, and Matthew gives a flash-back to the banquet for Herod's birthday where Salome dances and all her mother's hatred and malice for John plays on her husband Herod's pride and foolishness to orchestrate John's beheading.

So, Jesus withdrew: for the fifth time in the gospel, withdrawal follows aggression from imperial power. To withdraw is to refuse to play in the tyrant's world and by the tyrant's rules. It is to make a space for a different world, God's, marked by life-giving structures and compassionate practices such as healing and feeding. Such a space is not found in the centres of power, carefully controlled to protect the self-interest of the powerful. It is found on the margins, in an insignificant place, a deserted place, a place of no use to the authorities and very threatening to them, but of central importance to God's purposes.

Jesus might have withdrawn, but his planned retreat fails to materialise. The crowds are waiting for him: people oppressed by foreign occupation, poverty, disease and hunger. Again, Jesus puts aside his own needs because of his feeling for the people and their problems. He provides healing and food, the two things they most desperately need.

Notice how Matthew sets Herod's banquet and Jesus' banquet side by side, and how powerful it is. Herod's is a banquet of greed and indulgence, for the elite. It exudes vindictiveness, injustice and the abuse of power and it results in death. Jesus' banquet happens in a desert place - a place consistent with the whole movement of Jesus' life, away from the centres of power, away to the margins. Jesus' banquet happens here, for people on the margins in need. Jesus cures the sick and provides food, bread and fish, in abundance. The beneficiaries are not the powerful but the poor and marginalised. At the heart of Jesus' banquet is compassion and everyone is satisfied.

The multiplication of the loaves is one of the more difficult miracles of Jesus to account for in terms of what might have 'really happened'. The quest to find out is ultimately fruitless since we simply have not got sufficient information to determine with any confidence what might lie behind the tradition in all the forms in which it appears across the gospels. The multiple accounts point to the significance of the tradition in early Christianity. It is on this that we should focus.

First, we can notice the incident looks back to biblical traditions telling of miraculous provision of food. It connects with other biblical stories that witness to God's love - Moses feeding the people with manna in the wilderness, and Elisha feeding 100 men with 20 loaves of barley. It is that story that provides the model for the gospel account.

But Matthew does not use the story just to point us backward: it also looks forward to the Eucharist, and ultimately, to the final banquet in the kingdom of God, of which the Eucharist is a foretaste.

Central to the significance of this gospel story is the way in which it does anticipate the Last Supper and the Christian Eucharist. Matthew's community would have recognised the phrases as we do, 'Jesus took the loaves, looked up to heaven and blessed and broke, and gave to his disciples'. As we hear the reading, our own practice of coming to the Eucharist is in our mind - and we are part of the crowd and we sense afresh Christ's compassionate feeding of us with his life and his love, and the abundance of his provision - more than we need, a never failing supply: we, too, are enjoying the same divine hospitality the Galilean crowds experienced from Jesus, and experiencing it in the same extravagant degree. And we're reminded of Jesus' concern for human spiritual needs and spiritual hunger, and also for our physical needs and all our human physical hungering, yours and mine — for food and friendship and comfort and meaning and hope. At Communion we're reminded that God takes seriously all the dimensions of human brokenness and need.

When you read the feeding of the 5,000 in Matthew's gospel next to the other gospel accounts one of the things that stands out is the important role Matthew gives the disciples. In the other gospels the disciples are more passive and they don't understand. In Matthew's gospel they are essential to what happens. They share Jesus' compassion for the crowd, and when Jesus tells them to feed the crowd they produce their meagre supplies, 5 loaves and 2 fish. Matthew omits any reference to a young boy; he wants the connection to the disciples direct. His point is, the resources may be meagre, but they are enough, and more than enough for God. The disciples become the essential agents of Christ's compassion.

One of the things that holds many people back from active engagement in Christian loving is the feeling that they have little or nothing to offer. And it can feel like that. As we reflect on the needs of the world and even the needs of the people next to us, our families and friends it can feel like it is beyond our resources and our abilities. But this account is so hopeful and it won't let us off the hook. The little we have is enough - it is enough for God, how else would any of us get involved - and our small action can make a difference and the accumulation of all our small actions can make a big difference; and the accumulation of our combined commitments to create loving community and to seek greater justice and equity for the poor can change the world; and our commitments to do our bit to be better world citizens and encourage our government to look beyond immediate self-interests to the people, the nations on the margins can make a difference.

The miraculous feeding, and our being here to celebrate the Eucharist Sunday by Sunday, make clear that the essence of what God wants to do for humanity is simply to be a most generous host at the banquet of the kingdom. The story of the feeding depicts people being fed with real food: it has an unmistakeable bearing upon the problem of hunger still affecting so many in the world. Jesus looked upon the large crowd and took pity on them. When the Church celebrates the Eucharist the same Christ is here present in the community, instructing us as he instructed his disciples. "Give them something to eat yourselves". The Eucharist will never be complete so long as people still go hungry in our world.