

All are fed

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost — 6 August 2017
Revd Martin Johnson

Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 145.8-9, 14-21; Romans 9:1-8; Matthew 14:13-21

Come, O Thou Traveler unknown,
Whom still I hold but cannot see;
My company before is gone,
And I am left alone with Thee;
With Thee all night I mean to stay,
And wrestle till the break of day.

That is the first verse of the words of the Wesley hymn based on the Old Testament text we heard this morning, the story of Jacob's wrestle with God, a wrestle which we are told resulted in his new name: "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." This is our story too, we the new Israel, we the people who continue to wrestle with God and with the issues of our world, those seemingly intractable problems.

I watched the movie "Dunkirk" during the week. It was a great movie, filled with those dreadful dilemmas of war. The soundtrack was largely lost amidst the sounds of aircraft and explosives, etc. But at one point I became aware of some long notes playing in the background. When I listened carefully I realized that it was a long slow rendition of the Nimrod movement from Elgar's Enigma Variations. It spoke, almost imperceptibly, of hope in the midst of war.

The feeding miracles are perhaps the most well-known parts of the gospels. Both Matthew and Mark have two accounts, with Jesus feeding crowds of 5,000 and 4,000, whereas Luke and John mention the feeding only once. Much ink has been spilt on these accounts, much of it by people much cleverer than me, so suffice to say that, *yes*, I do believe it to be a miracle. But it's not magic, the fact that someone was prepared to share their lunch, is indeed a miracle, but there is much more to this story!

The story is an echo of the Old Testament story in the second book of Kings: A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, "Give it to the people and let them eat." But his servant said, "How can I set this before a hundred people?" So he repeated, "Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the LORD, 'They shall eat and have some left.'" He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.

This mysterious man from Baal-shalishah seems to be making a sacrificial offering. The bread that he offers has been baked from the first ripe grain which suggests that he was being obedient to the law to offer God the first fruits of the harvest. Perhaps we can gain some clues from this much older story.

Today we have heard the account from Matthew's gospel. Now this doesn't really differ from the other accounts greatly, but what each account does is place this narrative in a particular context. Matthew's account is set in the context of two meals. The first is the feast at which Herod, probably full of wine, offers a young girl anything after she dances for him. She asks for the head of the Baptist and Herod, realizing he cannot go back on his word, duly presents it. When Jesus hears this devastating news, he retreats to a quiet place and of course he is followed. Followed by 5,000 families for whom he feels great compassion. He asks, "What have you to eat?" "We have *nothing* but five loaves and two fish." Jesus recognises the

sacrificial nature of the offering, it is all they have. Jesus takes it and conducts that familiar fourfold ritual—he takes, blesses, breaks and gives, just as we do here at the altar.

We are those disciples. We have little, if anything, to offer. But what we have we give, and what we receive back, is enough for us and it indeed spills over: twelve baskets ... enough for you to go out into the byways and highways of O'Connor and feed those who are not here. Remember that what you have received is not dependent on your offering: it doesn't work like that. What you have offered should be out of gratitude or thanksgiving. It is not offered to earn a reward. We can never earn what it is that we receive back. It is freely given to you and to those outside who are open to receive it.

We continue to wrestle with God. We are torn in the way that the world's resources should be divided. An article in the paper this week suggests that billions of dollars are spent on a missile shield. And yet millions could be fed with this and still more would be left over. This is epitomized by those two feasts. The first, Herod's, is all about empire, Rome. A small group gather for a feast that would no doubt feed hundreds. Jesus hearing this story, counters it. He takes that small sacrificial offering and makes of it a feast for thousands.

The miracle of the feeding is about to happen again here, that miracle is once again about to be re-enacted. The Eucharist is politics in ritual. It will never cease, until such time as our wrestling is over, the awful dilemmas are done, and all are fed.

Lame as I am, I take the prey;
Hell, earth and sin, with ease o'ercome.
I leap for joy, pursue my way,
And, as a bounding hart, I run,
Through all eternity to prove
Thy nature and Thy name is Love.