

Sunday 2nd August 2020 Feeding the Hungry

Readings: Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

Intro

Have you ever thought about how obsessed our culture is with food? C.S. Lewis once talked about the improbability of getting a large audience to watch someone bringing a covered plate on to the stage and then slowly lifting the cover so as to let everyone see .. that it contained a mutton chop or a bit of bacon, would you not think, he writes, that in that country something had gone wrong with the appetite for food?" I wonder if that brought to mind any of our current TV shows? Just think how many TV cooking shows there are. I counted 11 that are available free-to-air over this weekend alone, and 35 in the past week. Now that does include some repeats but it doesn't include popular shows like My Kitchen Rules or the Great British Bake-off. We are a culture quite obsessed with food

But at the same time we are all familiar with appeals to help starving children. One TV report from Africa said that lockdown was just not possible – the people have to work to eat. They are more in danger of dying from starvation than from Covid 19. It's not good is it? And even here in NZ we know that there are children who go to bed hungry.

What is the Bible's take on all this?

Biblical comment on food

The Bible is a very down to earth book. The very first chapter tells us how God created the earth as a place for humankind to live in and enjoy. Genesis 1:28 describes how God provided seed-bearing plants and all kinds of trees so that we would have food to eat. There was plenty for the birds, animals and insects too. The Bible starts in an earthly garden in Genesis 2 and finishes in a renewed garden in Revelation 22 and in between there are images of the abundance which God desires for his people. He leads them to a land flowing with milk and honey (Deuteronomy 31:20); he is the good shepherd who leads his flock to green pastures (Psalm 23:); all creatures look to God to give them their food in due season (Psalm 104:27); even the birds of the air are fed by him (Matthew 6:26). Micah 4:4 Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid. But also Zechariah 3:10 "On that day,' declares the LORD of Hosts, 'each of you will invite his neighbour to sit under his vine and under his fig tree."

Sharing food with others is an important part of our own Kiwi culture just as it was in biblical times. Some of you may remember that a couple of years ago Karl Summerfield preached a sermon about sharing food. Anybody remember? I remembered the sermon but not what Karl had said. - So, I went onto our Church website and had a listen – and I recommend you do the same (July 2018). Anyway, Karl, you may recognise some of your thoughts coming through in what we are sharing this morning.

Food is a necessity of life but it's not just about basic nutrition, is it? Think of all the different colours, tastes and textures we can enjoy – and even more so now as we have a variety of ethnic cuisines on our own doorstep.

Sometimes it is all about the food but add in good company and you have something really special. We often celebrate special occasions with a meal: birthday parties, wedding breakfasts, even funeral wakes are times when we get together over a meal. One of the things John and I will miss out on because of Covid 19 is getting together with our family in UK to celebrate our Golden Wedding.

Jesus enjoyed a good meal out too. What examples can you think of: wedding in Cana; house of Simon the Pharisee; meal with Zacchaeus; being entertained at the house of Mary and Martha – when Martha got all upset!

In fact Jesus had a bit of a reputation: “The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Luke 7:34; Matthew 11:19.

But I’m sure Jesus enjoyed plenty of ordinary meals with his disciples as well. Food doesn’t have to be elaborate, does it, when we hang out with good friends. The loaves and fishes in our Gospel story would have been a typical meal of the day.

All of these are images of celebration and abundance but our theme and Gospel passage remind us that real life is not always like that.

Matthew 14:13-21

The feeding of the 5000 is the only miracle that is in all four gospels. (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-15). That immediately tells us something. Everything in God’s Word is important; if it’s repeated it’s really important; if it is said four times it is really, really, really, really important – in other words sit up and listen.

This is more than a story about an unexpected picnic. It tells us something significant about who Jesus is and what he came to do, and as disciples, followers of Jesus who are trying live as he did, we need to sit up and listen.

As they heard this story or read about it, the early Christians would have had all sorts of bells going off in their heads. They would have heard it as a story about a religious leader feeding hungry people in a remote solitary place – a wilderness. Who do you think they would have had in mind? Moses. Moses had fed the people of Israel manna – bread from heaven, and Jesus gives thanks to God and miraculously feeds the people bread. There are other Old Testament stories too about Elijah (1 Kings 17:2-6) and Elisha (2 Kings 4:42-44).

But what Jesus is doing here is not just standing in the tradition of Moses, though he is doing that, he is giving the Jews a sign, one that we usually miss. You see the Jews believed that the messianic age would see the return of bread from heaven, so in effect, Jesus is saying, ‘See, here is the bread from heaven, and I am the Messiah.’ And they got it. John tells us “After the people saw the sign Jesus performed they began to say, ‘Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.’” And after that Jesus had to retreat to the mountains because they wanted to make him king. (John 6:14-15). He is the king who is coming into his kingdom but he is not their sort of king and his kingdom is not their sort of kingdom.

So, this story is about much more than providing food for hungry people.

But let's go back to the beginning of the story.

Jesus has just heard about the death of John the Baptist and like many of us when we get news like that he just wants to be alone, to grieve, to come to terms with it. He doesn't get much chance to do this, though, because the crowds follow him. I wonder how you would react to this intrusion on your me time?

Jesus does not react with anger or frustration but with compassion. Tom Wright has some powerful words to say about this. **"Before the outward and visible works of power, healing the sick, comes the inward and invisible work of power, in which Jesus transforms his own feelings into love for those in need."**

As we as a church consider fresh ways of reaching out to our community we need that inner transformation too, don't we? We need to have Jesus' compassion.

We can see how Jesus cares for people and we want to care for them as well. So maybe we think about what might be best for them and come up with a suggestion like the disciples did. "It's getting late," they said, "wouldn't it be a good idea to send the people away now so they have a chance to buy some food."

Good idea. But Jesus takes their good idea and turns it into something they weren't expecting. "Why don't you give them something to eat?" Hang on a minute – can't you hear their excuses – our excuses. That's impossible – we've only got five loaves and two fish." We haven't got the money, the resources, the people, the time, the energy, the expertise" I can't do it!

Jesus doesn't look at what we haven't got he looks at what we have got. "Bring the loaves and fishes to me," Jesus says. And then the miracle happens. He gives thanks; probably the traditional Jewish blessing: "Blessed be thou O Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth." And the disciples begin to give bread and a bit of fish to one person after another, after another, after another, after another, until in the end all are fed and are satisfied, with twelve baskets of left overs. Wow! Amazing!

There is much more to this story than we have time to explore this morning. The people recline on the grass and enjoy a super-abundance of food – echoes of the eschatological banquet – the great celebratory feast when Jesus returns. John continues the story with Jesus identifying himself as the bread of life and links it to images of the Eucharist. But I want to finish by seeing how all this relates to us and our calling to be Christ's disciples here and now.

Challenge: What is hunger?

We don't have to look too far to see real needs in our community, including the need for food and other essentials. Our Community Pantry is obviously meeting a need. Remember what James says: "If someone is without clothes and daily food and all you do is say, 'Go in peace and keep warm and well-fed,' but you don't do anything about their physical needs – what good is that?"

But the people we come in contact with have other needs as well and we are hoping to set up some sort of system to point them to where they can find further help.

Because it's not all about food, is it? Many, if not all of us know that you can be hungry for other things besides food. The people who come to Lunch on the Hill or All Saints' Loaves and Fishes are also looking for friendship, belonging, and just having the opportunity to chat. It was what we really missed during lockdown.

You know the crowds that followed Jesus were not looking for a free meal. They just wanted to be with Jesus, and the Gospel accounts tell us that Jesus had compassion on them. They felt his love. He healed them; he spoke to them about the Kingdom of God – he gave them hope.

Tim Keller talked about this in an interview our house group watched recently. When he talks to young people he doesn't start with the truth of the resurrection or arguments that might have appealed to a previous generation. He starts where they're at with what they are searching for: freedom, meaning, identity, a basis for doing justice. And he says to them "I have resources that can help you with that."

And this is where our reading from Romans comes in. Paul had had a dramatic encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road and for him it had changed everything. He had to re-think his Jewish faith in the light of what he now knew. Not abandon it but re-interpret it as he came to recognise Jesus as God's Messiah - the culmination of God's plan of salvation revealed to the people of Israel and now open to all.

Paul is grieving over the fact that so many of his fellow-Jews have not seen this, but he also wants the Gentile Christians in Rome, and we ourselves, to appreciate the fact that we have been grafted into the olive tree of Israel. We too benefit from their heritage: (Romans 9:4-5) adoption into God's family; the experience of the divine glory - that is God's presence - in their midst, the covenants and promises made with the people and their leaders, the law, temple worship, the patriarchs and the privilege of being the people through whom the messiah, God's rescuer, would come.

Do you notice that all of these are about relationship, God's reaching out and extending of himself to draw us all into a relationship with himself. Relationship, belonging is what we are all looking for today. This is the message of love, compassion and hope that we can bring to those who are hungry for more than food.

Just listen to what Paul writes in the rest of Romans:

Romans 1:7 – "To all in Rome (and Richmond!) who are loved by God and called to be his holy people."

Romans 8:1-2 "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free."

Romans 8:15-16 "The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'"

Romans 8:39 “Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.”

Our lives have been changed by these truths. The possibility of a relationship with God and the way that impacts how we see ourselves can bring restoration and healing that goes deeper than feeding the body. They are words that bring life.

When we look at our priorities for making changes or beginning something new let's start with what people are hungry for. I think some of the ideas we have been talking about at Vestry are doing that – but maybe there is something more.

Like the disciples we may well feel it is all too big for us, but let's be excited as we see what Jesus can do with whatever we have to offer. Time to pray or be with people; a tin of baked beans to put on the Community Pantry table; or maybe imaginative ideas to connect with people where they're at.

What is God calling you to do? if you're like me you may not want to listen – we can resent the demands on our already busy lives; or we may feel inadequate to the task.

I want to finish with another quote from Tom Wright:

“By hanging around Jesus, you’ve had an idea. It wasn’t quite in focus, but your main intention – in this case, that people should be fed – is on target. Jesus proposes achieving that aim by different means. You say it’s impossible –but you’re prepared to give him the little you’ve got, if it’ll be any good. Of course it means you’ll go hungry yourself ... but by now you’re in too deep to stop. Once the power of Jesus’ compassion has begun to catch you up in its flow, you can’t stop.”

We are blessed to be a blessing. We have been fed that we might feed others. What does that look like for us at Holy Trinity right now? What does it look like for you?

What is God saying to you?

What are you going to do about it?

What is your next step?