

Sermon series Hahi Karaitiana (Christ's Church)

Meagreness and abundance

1 Kings 17:7 – 16, Luke 5:4 - 11

THE first time I saw her she was standing at a supermarket deli counter eating a marinated artichoke off a plastic fork.

She chewed slowly. Stick thin. Elderly. Just a bunch of pink carnations and a packet of ham in her shopping basket.

The next time I saw her she was shoplifting fake crabmeat.

She froze, her fingers halfway under the clingfilm wrap of a pre-packaged tray of ... surimi. I smiled. She ate.

It was three days before Christmas. I went home from the supermarket with prawns, new potatoes, chocolate and champagne and, on that same day, 326 people went to the Auckland City Mission and asked for food.

I quote Kim Knight, whose article was in the Sunday Star Times in February 2011.¹ Since then the gap between the rich and poor has only grown wider.

New Zealand's two richest people now own more wealth than 30 percent of the adult population combined.² Oxfam research reveals that the richest one percent now hold 20 percent of the wealth in New Zealand, while 90 percent of the population owns less than half of the nation's wealth.

Over a third of the 252 extremely wealthy declared income of less than \$70,000 in 2015, despite \$70,000 being the point where the top tax rate kicks in.³

¹ www.stuff.co.nz/sunday-star-times/features/4676276/Hunger-pains

² Graeme Hart and Richard Chandler have net worths of \$8.98 billion and \$3.79 billion respectively. Last year Mr Chandler was named as using the law firm Mossack Fonseca, which was at the centre of the Panama Papers tax avoidance controversy.

³ <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2017/01/revealed-new-zealand-s-growing-wealth-gap-fracturing-society.html>

So who lives in poverty in NZ? Most affected are beneficiaries with children: well over half (57%) of all households with children that received a benefit experience hardship.

Children are at special risk of poverty: dependent children under 18 years are the age group with the highest rate of hardship with almost a quarter experiencing some hardship.

And Pacific people are more affected than other cultures. Nearly 40% live in significant or severe hardship, compared to nearly a third of Māori (32%) or less than a sixth of Asian or Pakeha ethnicity.⁴

We really don't want to hear statistics like this do we? What do we do about them?

And how could our loving God allow this to happen? This is our second sermon in the series on Hahi Karaitiana (Christ's Church). And we are considering meagreness and abundance.

Today we've read two miraculous stories of God's supernatural provision. Elijah prophesied to the widow that "The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land." 1 Kings 17:14 Jesus mates listened to what he said and caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. Luke 5:6

What examples can you think of where the Lord used people to provide for others? Here are some others:

- A servant girl suggests to Naaman's wife that she goes to see the prophet Elisha to be cured of his leprosy. God cures him. 2 Kings 5
- Through Mordecai and Esther, God's people are saved and a plot to assassinate the king is thwarted.

⁴ <http://nzccss.org.nz/work/poverty/facts-about-poverty/fact-1-there-is-poverty-in-the-midst-of-prosperity-in-aotearoa-new-zealand/>

- God provides wise advice through Jethro his son-in-law Moses. Moses was overwhelmed with his task to lead Israel so Jethro suggests he delegate responsibility for leadership and organise the people into groups for oversight. Exodus 18:13-27
- Jesus uses the boy's original gift of loaves and fishes to produce food for 5000 men and goodness knows how many women and children. John 6:1 – 14

Perhaps there is a very worrying answer to our question about why God allows poverty in Aotearoa and across the world. Perhaps the Lord relies on us far more than we would like. Perhaps also whether we have a meagre amount or whether we have abundance is due to our mindset and how we distribute resources.

We have a foodbank here at church. Alice Burrough has run it for many years. Church folk give items – some give every week. Yet the foodbank is under-utilised really. Maybe it's time to get smarter about this; perhaps sending our food to St Vincent de Paul who operate in Richmond community? Every so often the Ministers' Association talk about how we can work more effectively together in this but nothing ever seems to come from the talk.

What does the Lord require of us?

"... to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Micah 6:8

I guess it's up to us to figure out prayerfully and creatively what that looks like in Richmond community. Hopefully we can honour the Lord's trust in us.

On the first day of my walk, I went to the kitchen of the refuge where I was staying. I met a man there who spun me a long line about being broke and not having enough money to stay another night there until his benefit day.

I thought the man was sleazy and that he was spinning me a yarn. I had euros in my pocket. I didn't give him anything.

I packed up and went into a Supermercado to get some snacks for my walk. Wandering around I wondered what I would buy. Much of the food was unfamiliar to me.

I was excited about my first days walk.

It was cold and raining.

And I felt guilty about not helping the man at the refuge.

And I was a little anxious and lonely too. The previous night I'd eaten alone not knowing anyone who would be walking. So here I am in this little store effectively asking God if I've made the right decision.

Next minute a short, beautiful, young blond woman in a blue jacket, wearing a back pack like me, walked up. She held a stick of French bread in her hand.

"I can't eat all of this" she said. "Break off as much as you need."

Doesn't sound like much does it?

But what she offered me in that moment was pure gift from God. It was God's way of providing for me.

This girl offered me God's provision and she offered it with love. Later I'd contrast that with my own meanness. Who was I to decide who was worth helping and who wasn't?

The bread that she offered was God's way of saying to me "I love you. You have nothing to prove. IF you drop out after this day I will still love you. I will provide for you in every way. I will eat with you and be with you always."

This girl, Alex from Switzerland, and I became friends. She doesn't consider herself a Christian. But she revealed the abundant love and provision of God to me in the midst of my own meagre thinking. Alex understand the principle of abundance when I did not.

Reflection questions:

What Biblical examples can you think of where the Lord provides through his people?

Are you aware of anyone in our community who lives in poverty?

What could you do to help?

What would enable you to provide that help?