

A TASTE OF THE KINGDOM

A sermon preached at Christ Church on Sunday 6th August 2017

Lectionary readings: Isaiah 55: 1 – 5: Matthew 14: 13 - 21

This week, two of my grandchildren came to stay. On the rainiest day I took them to a vulgar film, *Captain Underpants*. This is an animation film about two young pupils at a junior school in the USA. They hypnotize the headmaster and make him do ridiculous things like taking an assembly in his underpants; appearing to be incredibly dim-witted, and eventually becoming a superhero given the name *Captain Underpants*. The film was full of toilet humour, and at one point a gigantic toxic-waste-filled cyborg toilet spouted legs and went stomping around the city.

Needless to say William, eight, loved the film, but his grandad was less sympathetic. Grandad wants children to enjoy humour, but preferably not at other people's expense. If children's film and TV, their netflix and their videogames must be all about animation and fantasy, why does the fantasy have to involve violence, annihilation, death, and countless accidents in which no-one miraculously gets hurt? Why not fantasies where, instead, the people of the world get fed? Where there are no super-heroes (false Messiahs that save the world), but plots where different values of peace-building, of justice and of love prevail? Where the enemy is not some mythic space invaders but deep within ourselves – say, in the human indifference to suffering, or the corruption that follows the love of money? I was reminded of Paul's advice to the Christians at Philippi to 'Fill your thoughts'... with 'all that is true, all that is noble, all that is just and pure, all that is lovable and attractive, whatever is excellent and admirable (Phil. 4.8).

The Gospel reading today is the Feeding of the 5,000. The story is a 'taste of the kingdom', an acting out of what happens when God's love, mercy and unfailing provision are allowed to be unleashed into the world. (That is why there is a reference in all 5 hymns to food.) 'Do not worry over what to eat'? Would you be able to sing that hymn in Somalia, or Kenya, Sudan, or Syria, or Yemen? Let's look at this miracle again – the only miracle recorded in all four gospels – and ask how its meaning might bring fresh hope to an exhausted and overpopulated planet.

Jesus' audience followed him to a 'remote place' (13) and were captivated by his teaching. They didn't realise how quickly time had passed. It was now dusk and they had not eaten. Jesus feeds the crowd. Matthew is working on his Jewish readers. He knows his readers know that when the Jewish people escaped from Egypt at the Exodus, they too were once in a remote place, hungry. And God miraculously fed them with manna from heaven. Jesus is doing the same thing. Only God can do this. And this is what God does. God feeds the hungry. Where the hungry are fed, *there* is God.

Not only does God feed the hungry: God does it in real divine style. There are twelve baskets of bread left over. There are no half measures: no 'making do'. God's provisions are *abundant*.

When the Gospel writers described the Last Supper, they said that Jesus did four things. He *took* bread: he *gave thanks* or *blessed* it; he *broke* it: and he *gave* it. We use the same words at the Eucharist today. But the Gospel writers used the same four actions to describe Jesus' feeding of the crowd!

People hearing the Gospel read would easily make the connection between the feeding of the Jews in the desert, the feeding of the crowd, and the feeding at the Eucharist. They are different aspects of divine grace, grace which meets all the needs of God's people.

Today there are more than 5,000 people who need a miracle in order to be fed. There are 6.8 billion people on the planet today, and that will rise to 9.2 billion by 2050. Forecasts indicate that it will prove impossible to feed them. Much more of Africa will become desert (and the temperatures in southern Europe are currently so high, thousands of deaths from heatstroke are predicted in the present century. We have been fruitful, and multiplied, but we have emptied the earth instead of replenishing it, and we have subdued it until it can take no more.

I wish the churches were more vocal about the global problem of feeding tomorrow's children as well as today's. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible were fearless in taking on the kings of their day when they believed their policies were unjust and contrary to the will of God. Food has become not just a political issue, but a moral one as well. Most fisherfolk voted to leave the Common Market, hoping to keep out European boats from British waters. What if the Europeans put a tariff on the fish we try to sell them? How will they think then? Food is politics (even if we don't want to hear that). There were just two fish in this story, and from them, everyone had enough with more to spare. Speaking the truth about food means the next generation will need to lose our fondness for regular meat and fish; living and eating more simply; allowing producers, including British farmers and fisherfolk, to get a fair price for what they provide. Millions of people in China and Asia want the same standard of living that we have enjoyed for years, and already there are insufficient crops and other raw materials to go round. (And we can say the same thing about oil, and about water.)

At times I feel overwhelmed at the problems confronting humankind at the present time. Christians have a message of hope with which to address this situation. We will continue to buy *fairly traded* products. We see the huge disparities of wealth and possessions as the result of the *universal sinfulness of humankind*. We know we benefit from this, and we even collude with it. Massive injustice combined with indifference is one of the obvious manifestations of sin in all its ugliness. The Gospel message is that sin has been overcome and a new humanity made possible which triumphs over injustice and indifference (and where there are more enriching films to see that Captain Underpants. When Jesus saw the hungry crowd, Matthew observed, 'his heart went out to them'. He was 'moved with compassion'. There is *hope* to be found in the actions of Jesus. He *took bread*. Bread is already the fruit of co-operation of human ingenuity and divine gift. He *gave thanks*: he recognised that all we have comes from God. He *broke* it: what we are given is to be *shared*. He *gave it*. In the giving of it the miracle happened.

In the Eucharist the meanings of these actions are doubled. The bread is Christ's body for which *we* give thanks. The breaking of it is the depth of the divine love in its taking on human pain, suffering and being the victim. The *giving* of it is so that everyone might have life. We dare to hope that there are other forces at work in the world, and we point to these – we enact them – at the Eucharist. God has not given up on an exhausted and starving world. We can all testify to that, because there is a Bread of Life which feeds us. When the will of God is done, no-one is left out, and there are always baskets left over.

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