

Matthew 14:13-21

The 9th Sunday After Pentecost

August 2, 2020

In the Sixth Century BC, the Babylonians conquered Judah and dragged many Jews into exile in Babylon. For forty years they lived as foreigners and slaves in a strange land, cogs in the machinery of empire. They built houses but did not live in them, planted and tilled fields but did not enjoy their bounty, received meagre coinage instead of the fruits of their labours. They lived with their memories of their homeland, saw their children grow up speaking the language of their oppressors, living in a land that did not know their ancestors and did not feed their souls.

But the writer we know as Second Isaiah proclaimed that God was on the move. The Persian king Cyrus was sweeping through the Babylonian empire like a wildfire through a dry pine forest. Soon, the prophet said, the people could return home. God was inviting them home: to a land where they could grow and eat good food and drink luxuries like wine and milk. It was a land where they could be themselves and worship the God of their childhoods and of their mothers and fathers, a God who made a covenant with them. All they had to do was accept the invitation, dream the dream, see and share the vision.

And they did it. It was hard, but they did it.

For a while.

But they were never truly free, and one foreign overlord replaced another until the Romans moved in. Although they were living in their ancestral homeland they were still farming and labouring for landlords, not themselves. The rich people in Jerusalem were buying meat and wine and milk with Roman coins while the peasants who produced the wealth subsisted on their leavings.

So the Jews in our Gospel reading are hungry. They are hungry for good food and drink, but they are also hungry for a world where no-one is hungry. They are hungry for a world where people live for others, not because they are forced to but because living for others is living for God and for one's own need for communion, for beauty, for meaning.

They are hungry for the promises of their scriptures; for the Word of God; for a prophet.

Are we hungry?

I think there's a good chance nobody listening to this is hungry because they can't afford food. But some of us do live near the poverty line, or subsist on welfare or a pension, and it's hard to afford good food, nourishing food. If you want healthy and fresh fruits and vegetables, you likely pay more than for a frozen dinner. But money isn't the only thing that goes into a good meal, is it? There's also time. You need to have the time

to prepare and cook a proper meal, and if your kids are out of school and you can't find or afford day camps and you're trying to work a job - or be a full-time parent - then this pandemic is putting even more stress on your time and energy. There's also motivation. If you're alone, by choice or by circumstance, it might be hard to see the point to preparing a nice meal for yourself when it's so much easier to throw a Pizza Pop or three in the microwave.

Our food isn't just about food, is it? Food is a symbol. It says something about your mood and your circumstances. Ice cream is a day at the beach—or consolation on the couch at 1 AM after a breakup. Bread is boring, a staple—or the Body of Christ, broken, lifted up, shared, feeding and constituting the family of God.

So. What's really going on, when these hungry people are so desperate for Jesus that they won't give him time to himself? What are they hungry for? And what is this story really about?

John the Baptist preached the kingdom of God: an alternative kingdom to the kingdoms of Herod and Caesar. He preached that rules of justice and ethics apply to Herod as well as to peasants. Herod has just executed him for it, and although Jesus responds by withdrawing to a deserted place—possibly to pray and mourn for his martyred colleague—the people seek him out in turn. They hunger for more of John's teaching, and Jesus already has a reputation. Some say he is Elijah, or another prophet,

returned to proclaim the Word of God. So Jesus feeds their hunger for this Word. He teaches about the God of Isaiah—a God who offers good food to peasants who get only the crumbs—and a world where that is possible. I don't think this is just about food. "Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food," says God in Isaiah. "Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live." Eating blends into listening; the Word of God is the rich food they are invited to eat, and if they eat it then they will inherit the covenant of steadfast love that God made with their ancestor, David. David was a witness to the love of God to all the peoples, but now this covenant is with all the Jews; they will be witnesses to the covenant. They will all be the ones to share God's invitation to all the peoples, to share in the life that God creates among them.

The disciples say to Jesus, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves."

But the God of Isaiah does not send the people away; instead, the God of Isaiah gathers her scattered children, and promises that in the deserted places

"the mountains and the hills before you

shall burst into song,

and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;

instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle."

The cypress is a tall and beautiful tree used for construction of the Temple, and the myrtle is a pleasant-smelling shrub used in a festival celebrating the Exodus. This is not a desolate wilderness; it is full of the presence of God and echoes with the story of God's people.

The God of Isaiah does not let her people go hungry; instead, she promises food for the penniless, "wine and milk without money and without price."

When Jesus invites the disciples to give them something to eat, he is inviting them to share and trust in the Word of God. When they move among the people, distributing their meagre five loaves and two fish, they become the Word of God. They become witnesses to God's covenant alive and renewed and more than sufficient to fill both the bodies and souls of God's children.

The words of Isaiah are not dry words and unfulfilled promises for another time and place. Through the Spirit of God alive in Christ, they are the very Word of God alive and active again and again: alive on the hills of Galilee; on the hills of Mission; in the fields and forests of Aldergove; Mt. Lehman; and Abbotsford. God does not offer welfare subsistence, but the full and rich life of the kingdom of God.

If this sounds just like pretty words, if you have wondered, "but what does this mean for us?" then you need look no further than the park beside my home a few weeks

ago. My daughter Zoë decided to run a lemonade stand. This is a rite of passage for children, an initiation into the market economy and the concepts of profit, of supply and demand, of supply chains and overhead costs.

But Zoë failed that course. Zoë decided that this would be a *free* lemonade stand. Her friends happened to be at the park also, and once they had tasted her cold, homemade, *free* lemonade, they became lemonade evangelists, running all over the park, inviting everyone who thirsted to come to the waters, and those without money to come, buy, and drink. And for a moment, that park was a community, an alternative kingdom.

Lemonade is more than lemonade. Bread and fish is more than bread and fish. It can be a message: You are not alone. You are not a cog in a machine. You are a child of God. You are loved. A better world is possible.

Bread and fish and lemonade: sacraments of the kingdom of God, which is already and not yet, always on the way and yet already here. It is not a crazy vision. It is as simple and possible and local as a basket of bread, or a lemonade stand.

Amen.

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"Myrtle." *Ibid.*, pg. 721.