

## Sermon for August 2nd - feeding and feasting

Celebration means food – feasting! Weddings, parties, Christmas, we mark them all with a celebratory meal with people we love. At the moment obviously we can't meet and feast, but that means we look forward even more to coming together and sharing food. One of the rites of passage for my generation was inviting people round for a meal. Sharing food is a way of sealing friendships.

The founding story of our forebears – the escape from Egypt – is recalled every year at Passover as Jews re-live the hurried feast eaten before they left Egypt. And our founding story as Christians pivots on the Last Supper which we recall every Sunday as we relive Christ's last meal, sharing with Christ in the broken bread as it stands in for and becomes his broken body.

Three feasts are recalled in today's readings. Isaiah invites the exiled Israelites to a covenantal feast with God, 'the Holy One of Israel.' 'Don't waste time and money on the things that are not of God.' Isaiah says, 'Instead be part of the new Israel in the return to Jerusalem.'<sup>1</sup> One of the problems for Isaiah was persuading the new generation of Israelites to return from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem. Not all of them wanted to. Some had found new, comfortable lives with Babylonian wives and families and the idea of returning to a ruined city surrounded by hostile tribes was not appealing. To accept Isaiah's invitation would be to choose a hard but celebratory life as people of God rather than comfort but spiritual death in exile.

The second feast is the celebration Herod Antipas held for his birthday. That story is told in the first half of Matthew chapter 14, just before today's reading<sup>2</sup> and ends with the death of John the Baptist. It is to John's death that our reading refers to when it begins: 'Now when Jesus heard this he withdrew.'

Matthew juxtaposes Herod's birthday feast with the story of the feeding of the 5000. Herod's party would have been strictly by invitation. Only the most elite, powerful and those useful to Herod would have been invited – all men. Herod would have planned the feast – the menu, the fine wines and delicate food to titillate his guests' appetites and impress them with his wealth. Nothing would have been left to chance in case Herod were to lose face.

Jesus' feast on the other hand was completely unplanned. A need simply presented itself. The crowds had been there all day and the people were hungry. Jesus was prompted, Matthew tells us by compassion. It was a big gathering – huge, because everyone was welcome – women and men, sick and healthy, disabled and able bodied. Everyone who happened to be there. There was no menu and no forward planning. The food was provided by the Holy Spirit working with what was offered – five loaves and two fishes.

In an unpleasant twist, at Herod's party, a drunken Herod encouraged his stepdaughter, Salome, to entertain his guests by dancing and was so carried away that he promised her anything she wanted. She asked for the head of John the Baptist – and Herod was too sensitive about his own honour to do the courageous thing and save John's life by breaking his oath. John the Baptist was beheaded and Herod's party ended in blood and death.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 55: 1-5

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 14.13-21

By contrast, Jesus looked up to heaven, blessed the food, broke it and in a supreme display of faith that there would be enough food, gave it to his disciples to distribute. Everyone, Matthew writes, ate and was filled. Filled not only with food, but with the teaching they had heard, the healing they had seen and the miraculous demonstration of multiplication of the bread.

Herod's birthday party began with narcissism and ended in death. But Jesus' feast was begun in compassion and through the transformation of everyday offerings – bread and fish – produced enough life-giving food for everyone with food left over. And the feeding of the five thousand was also the foreshadowing of a fourth feast – the Last Supper.

Our celebration of the Eucharist is a descendent of both the Last Supper and the feeding of the five thousand. As we receive the bread today let's try not to let the practicalities of having to remove masks and use alcohol gel get in the way of the miraculous reality of what we are doing. We bring ourselves and all that we are and offer ourselves and our work; our five loaves and two fish. And Christ graciously takes us and our offering and makes us part of his continuing miraculous work in the world.

This summer I have been seeing that happen in Bath. Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has been a 'Make Lunch' initiative based at the Salvation Army cafe. It's like a military operation down there. Every week enough food to feed 40 families for a week is assembled and packed and distributed to 40 families throughout the community. Not just dry goods – fruit and vegetables, meat and even Easter eggs. Larger families have bigger deliveries. Dietary preferences are respected and there are always small games or puzzles for the children. People from Christ Church and other Bath churches are part of it. In September a new initiative will start as we set up a 'Community Pantry' in Oasis church. Those who need to can visit and collect food at a nominal cost. If you are interested in helping with that, volunteers will be needed tomorrow, Monday. Details are on your bulletin.

Nearly two thousand years later, ripples from that compassionate urge to feed the hungry, which Jesus modelled, are still moving through the church and in our community. And week by week as we re-live the last supper in our worship and try serve one another's needs in the community we are offered the gift of growing closer to those we serve, to each other and to Christ as we invited into his miracle-working in the world.