

## **Preaching Sunday 21 July 2024 – St Theodore’s Toorak Gardens**

*Ephesians 2: 11 – 22*

*Mark 6: 30 – 44 (with reference to John 6: 1 – 14)*

In the early 1990s, a parish in inner-city Melbourne began a midweek lunch called the 5000 Club. The idea behind this lunch was to gather members of the congregation and the local community together. There was no program. It was just a lunch cooked by the priest who was something of a chef, and a few helpers. It was never a large group, maybe 10 to 20 people. There were the regulars, and those who floated in and out, and others who came just once.

The meal was free. People gave as they could in money or in kind. It was just food and conversation. There was usually more than enough of both, and no one went away empty handed. Any leftovers were given away. The 5000 Club didn’t last for ever. It stopped when the priest left, but for the years it lasted, it served a good purpose. Beyond the meal itself, what people liked was the familiar rhythm, someone to speak with, somewhere to go and something good to eat. Good. Simple.

The feeding of the 5000 is a classic story appearing in all four gospels and there are more stories hidden beneath this story. On the surface we may consider this as a miraculous feeding, and we can ponder, as with all the miracles, how Jesus made it happen. An obvious answer is that something amazing yet invisible happened when Jesus took the small morsels of food available and broke, blessed and shared them - a bit like what we are about to do in the sharing of the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

Some have suggested that the miracle underneath the miracle is the sharing of food itself. The gospel of John’s account of the feeding of the 5000 includes a reference to a boy with the five small loaves and two fish. It has been suggested that everyone in the crowd would have a little food hidden away for the journey, perhaps enough for one day, perhaps more.

Was it perhaps the child like innocence of the boy who was honest about what food he had which was the true beginning of the miracle? When Jesus takes, breaks and shares the bread and the fish, the miracle may have been that the crowd, observing the ministry of the boy and disarmed by his innocence, then seeing Jesus bless what the boy had offered, found the courage to share what they had with each other.

A hidden story may also be what the crowd were doing as they sat in their groups and shared their food. We are given no details, but we can imagine people sitting in large groups of 50 or more. Would they have broken up into smaller groups? Would they have had conversations with people they had never met before, people from different places, tribes or faiths?

There may have been some interesting conversations. They may have shared life's troubles with each other, stories of loss, grief and trauma, and what they thought of the teachings of Jesus. There were probably curious questions. Is this Jesus the one we have been looking for? Did you hear about Jesus and the woman who touched his robe? What did Jesus mean when he said blessed are the cheesemakers – I mean peacemakers! What about that boy who just showed Jesus' apostles the food he was keeping for his own family? And how is it that we are eating our fill and there is still plenty left over?

A hidden story may also be the way Jesus responded to the need for the crowd to be fed. If we backtrack a little, our gospel begins with apostles telling Jesus what they had been up to that day. It seems as if they are already reviewing the busy-ness of the day, in the same way that we might sit alone or with others to reflect on what happened today and what it means for us as the day ends.

After this reflective time with the apostles, Jesus says, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile'. As we read, they get into a boat to find a remote place; and the crowd sees this; they want more, and they move with great haste; they are ready to hassle Jesus when he comes ashore to a remote but now crowded place. The demand is visible, and it outweighs the need for rest.

As the story evolves, we hear that 'Jesus had compassion on them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd'. Rather than take the rest that he and the apostles needed, he taught the crowd many things. Many things we can imagine they would have talked about sometime later while they were sitting and eating in their groups.

Then after the teaching, a new sense of urgency emerges. First it was late, then it was very late. The apostles urge Jesus, what are we to do with the crowd? They then said we know what you should do Jesus, send them away and tell them to look after themselves. To this Jesus says to the apostles 'You give them something to eat'. It is as if Jesus is saying, this problem is not just down to me it is down to all of us. The problem of scarcity arises. Do we have enough money to feed everybody? Jesus sends the apostles to find out. Jesus sends them away, and hopefully, for a short time, at least, he can get some rest. Where do the apostles go? Aldi? Panorama Foodland?

No, they go back to the crowd, to those who had already gathered, those who had already received from Jesus' teachings the words of life. And the result? Five loaves and two fish, and the ministry of the boy, one of the youngest, one who seems to most easily translate Jesus' words of life to a simple act of sharing, a simple work of love.

One of the hidden things perhaps is in the use of the word apostles. They are not described as disciples in this gospel but as apostles. A disciple is one who follows the leader, whereas an apostle is one who follows and who also leads. An apostle is one

who is sent. Jesus' decision to send the apostles to find out what can be done is at the heart of this story: it is not just down to me; it is down to all of us.

We have come full circle in this story, the ministry of Jesus teaching the crowd and the ministry of the boy who translates this teaching it into a simple action, something practical.

Perhaps it is the 'mutual ministry' that inspires the multiplication, that releases the energy and the life that exists within the crowd, in both giving and receiving, that is the miracle of the feeding of the 5000. The most confronting part of this is the possibility that it is not just up to Jesus to be the fixer. It is as much up to the apostles and the crowd itself to participate in finding the solution to the problems and the possibilities of the day. Jesus reminds us that we, individually and together, sometimes have what it takes in the gifts God has already given us, to do what seems impossible.

Our gospel also begs the question: where can we find a place where we can all be fed and heard, where we can be courageous enough to recognise that we are in some ways like lost sheep, seeking the comfort and security of a shepherd? As the shepherd gathers us in, we may be confronted by, or delighted by, or made curious by our differences as well as what we have in common. There may be sheep, and goats, and a few alpacas who wander in, all seeking to become part of the same gathered community.

Our reading from Ephesians addresses the classic division between Gentile and Jew which is not just a thing happening in Jesus' time but is very much with us today. The current situation in Gaza is a contemporary expression of this. The way I express this dilemma is the difference between 'contested space' and 'peaceful coexistence'. In other words, 'Is there enough room for all of us?' and 'Can we live peaceably together?'

What the writer of the Ephesians proclaims is that in Christ both Jew and Gentile can be one, while retaining what is distinctive to each. Our differences do not necessarily lead to division when we are one in Christ. There is a focus on reconciliation and what could be described as the oneness of the two. In Christ, we can inhabit the same space without division.

There are no insiders or outsiders, no distinction between church and world, sacred and secular. This can be very hard to hear and to believe. Do we really think God is here in this space more than God is when we disperse, when we are sent as today's apostles to live the life we live, to break, bless and share the daily bread of our lives?

We sometimes hear the term 'hiding in plain sight' in the negative sense of someone or something damaging or dangerous that we just cannot see. I wonder if we could use this term in a positive sense and ask: 'What may be hiding in plain sight that reflects the good news we hear today?' Several down to earth things come to mind.

Part of our gathering here at St Theodore's is a community of families with children called 'Breaking Bread'. How amazing is that? What opportunities exist to consider how children can teach us something about the life we live, how they, in simple and disarming ways, can minister to us? And a little child shall lead them...

We have the regular appeals for food for The Magdalene Centre and the annual drop in centre meal. So many participate in such activities not just through this parish but elsewhere. How good is that? We are part of a much wider chain of events here, working in unseen ways with others who share the food that has been offered, who engage in conversations with people who share the problems and possibilities of the day.

The way we support each other through our rostered activities, whether through our liturgies or the care of the buildings, gardens and grounds. And on top of that the things that just happen spontaneously. There is much we can celebrate in our mutual ministry, in what we do together in Christ's name.

Perhaps the last hidden thing in this story is the value and necessity of rest. It doesn't seem that Jesus or the apostles got much rest that day, but at least he knew when Jesus had had enough. "You give them something to eat".

Sometimes we need to be sent away, to do something, and sometimes to do absolutely nothing. Stories of Jesus sleeping on a cushion in a boat while storms rage, stories of Jesus withdrawing to a lonely place, are as important as stories of the activist Jesus, the Jesus who performs miracles.

Resting, we know has something to do with restoring our sense of energy and vitality, our sense of identity and purpose, and in realising the source of our energy. Today's gospel touches on the mutuality of giving and receiving, where we can seek and find those quiet spaces and those relationships where we recognise the amazing gift of God's energy in ourselves and each other. The energy of the Body of Christ and the Spirit with us.

As we prepare to receive the bread and the wine of the Eucharist, I share some of concluding words from Henri Nouwen's book '*Out of Solitude*' (1974). It is a book I have lived with for many years. I go back to it regularly, especially when I find I am losing a sense of balance between activity and rest, giving and receiving. It reminds me of the true source of my life and my energy and the miraculous moments when the hidden God is revealed in both solitude and activity, in ourselves and each other.

*We do not eat bread to still our hunger or drink wine to quench our thirst. We just eat a little bit of bread and drink a little bit of wine, in the realisation of the One who came, but is still to come; who touched our hearts, but has not yet taken all our sadness away.*

*And so, when we share some bread and some wine together, we do this not as people who have arrived, but as men and women who can support each other in patient expectation until we see him again. And then our hearts will be full of joy, a joy that no one can take from us.*

Amen.

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