

Matthew 14:13-21: Feeding the five thousand

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, '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.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Today's Gospel is well known to us. It's in all four Gospels. It teaches us about miracles, and about the kingdom of heaven. What does the Kingdom of heaven look like? How would we live if we were living in the kingdom of heaven?

In Matthew, this story comes immediately after the feast during which John the Baptist is killed at the whim of a young woman. Jesus you'll remember from the birth stories, was John the Baptist's cousin. A close relationship then and now, in the Middle East. Jesus was probably a member of the John the Baptist movement, a forerunner of the Jesus movement.

You'll remember that John's disciples went to Jesus when John was first put in prison and asked "Are you the one or must we wait for another?" So it's not beyond the bounds of possibility that this crowd on the side of the hill were part of the John the Baptist movement.

Today's story of the 5,000 on the side of the hill is a juxtaposition of Herod's lewd feast which went on for days, where the wealthy gathered, in Herod's newly built palace, during which a defenceless person was killed. At Herod's banquet there is pride, and arrogance, and scheming, and murder. At Jesus banquet there is healing, and trust, and sharing. And perhaps sadness.

Of course like many things about Jesus ministry it's not the first time a crowd came together and shared their food. If we look at 2 Kings 4:42-44, we see the same: large crowd, little food. But when the crowd put everything together, they found they had more than enough.

So not only does this story look back to Elisha's time, it also looks forward to Jesus last supper, and onward to our eucharist. In verse 19 of today's text we hear *...taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.*

Compare this with Matthew 26:26 which comes a little later *While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.'*

Doubtless the food at Jesus feast was more ordinary than that at Herod's feast, but it was more than enough.

All the rational explanations of everyone sharing that they had and so on, in my view, miss the point. The feeding of the five thousand teaches us that we have enough. That we always have enough. The minute we start thinking that we haven't got enough, then we surely will not have enough. Enough is a state of mind. Having faith that we have enough is a state of mind.

For the past few years, every year, John and I were invited to the Mosque at Kilbirnie to share in the breaking of the Ramadan fast, in a meal which is called Iftar. Often we were invited on guests night, Friday night and seated in a special room and doubtless given special food. Muslims treat guests particularly well.

One particular year though we were invited on an ordinary night. And so when we arrived, the men and women are separated for prayer, and also at the meal, so that particular evening, the women were hosted by a woman with two toddlers, who came from Gaza. At that time the war in Gaza was at its height.

What do you say to a woman who has left her country because of war; whose relatives at that very minute, are in huge danger? She was, of course, and this is my experience with Muslims, supremely hospitable, putting our needs before her own, although we had only been fasting since lunchtime or perhaps afternoon tea time, and she had been fasting since before daylight. She spent her meal time making sure we had enough, indeed more than enough, before she sat down to her own meal. Perhaps this is one of the ways the kingdom of heaven looks.

My friend Dave Moskovitz, one of the leaders of the Wellington Jewish community, was also there, which was pretty brave of him, because the time before we went to the Mosque, he had been the victim of some pretty vitriolic stuff about Zionists.

It is not terribly comfortable to sit at a table with Jews and Muslims while there is a war going on between Jews and Muslims, even if it is in far off Gaza. One wrong word, one question badly or inarticulately phrased can kick off a pretty devastating argument. And both sides are well entrenched in their arguments. The Jews believe Israel is the land promised by God, and after two thousand years of absence, during which they were persecuted in many of the places they settled, are entitled to return to the land God promised them. And after two thousand years to form a nation called Israel.

At its purest, Zionism is a movement to form a safe place for Jews, rather than a movement to persecute someone else.

The Palestinians, some Muslim, some Christian, believe they are entitled to live in the land that they have lived in and owned in the intervening time. Usually land has been owned by several generations.

When Jews fresh from the holocaust after the second world war, decided to take the land, which they had been colonizing since the beginning of the twentieth century, by force, the Palestinians were unprepared. Put bluntly, Palestinians have been the victims of this colonising force.

In my life time we have admired Israelis, the kibbutz movement, the pluckiness of a small band of people developing a seemingly undeveloped country. At last a homeland for the Jews. Any Jew anywhere in the world can make aliyah, can move to Israel and join the development.

But nothing is that simple. For example, there are more Jews in the United States than in Israel. The so called Jewish vote is extremely important to whoever is the ruling party, be it either Democrat or Republican. The United States is a huge donor to Israel, both Government and private aid. Israel is the recipient of huge amounts of both public and private military aid.

The Palestinians are not particularly popular with the other Arab states, so they do not receive huge amounts of aid. Most of the Palestinian Christians have emigrated, many to the United States.

The Muslims remain, many have had their land, and their homes taken from them. When I visited Bethlehem which is in the West bank, about fifteen years ago, there was 95% unemployment. People could not renew their permits to work in Israel, although they had been working in Israel, for years. I think it's easier now, but many of the shops and markets are shut up. People have left, emigrated. Israeli measures have in effect depopulated the West Bank.

The crunch is between a culture or race that holds the moral high ground with its escape from the holocaust, the lofty aspirations to build a country for Jews to live in, and a race or culture that owns the land, and has done for generations.

This is the basis of the current ongoing war in Gaza.

I count amongst my good friends both Jews and Muslims. It took years for me to convince Jews to allow Muslims to join the Council of Christians and Jews, and now they have, when I left to come here, we had a good tight group. Not easy when there is fighting in Gaza though.

To tie it all up with the text today, to understand what the kingdom of God might look like, if we lived as if we lived in the kingdom of God: today's text is about sharing what you have, about hospitality, it's about knowing that there is enough, that we have enough. That we have enough faith and enough air, enough food, enough shelter, and enough land, and a future. And that we have enough to share.

References

Harrington D.J., *The Gospel of Matthew Sacra Pagina series* Harrington D.J., ed., The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota: 1991