

Sermon - the kingdom of heaven made manifest: the feeding of the five thousand

Based on Matthew 14.13-21

The kingdom of heaven is like ...

- The Gospel stories over the last few Sundays have been of Jesus telling parables about the kingdom of heaven - parables that describe God's kingdom present in our lives in ways that we can relate to:
- a farmer sowing seeds, or a merchant trading in jewellery, or a baker mixing yeast in with the flour.
- We now come to another parable, but this time an enacted parable.
- The feeding of the five thousand is the kingdom of heaven made manifest.
- I like using the word *manifest*: it means to make apparent, to make something obvious or easily engaged with.
- So the feeding of the five thousand was an obvious example of the kingdom of heaven made real - God's kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven.
- This particular story of Jesus feeding thousands of people is one that is vital to the early churches - the Christian communities that the four Gospel writers first wrote for.
- We know this because the same basic story is told six times: twice each in Matthew's and Mark's Gospel accounts - differentiated as the feeding of the five thousand and the feeding of the four thousand - and once each in Luke's and John's Gospel accounts.

The model of the Eucharist

- The story's central significance is easily understood:
- it describes the Eucharistic actions of Jesus taking (the bread), blessing it, breaking it, and then sharing it.
- This is what Jesus enacted with his own life: being taken, blessed, broken, and shared.
- And what we are called to do with our own lives in response to what God effected through Jesus: we too offer ourselves to God - giving ourselves to God, who likewise takes what we offer to him, blesses, breaks, and shares all that we give.
- If we give only a small part of ourselves, God blesses, breaks, and shares that small part.
- If we give more of ourselves, God still blesses, breaks, and shares that larger part.
- Whatever we give of ourselves, it is this part that effectively participates in the kingdom of heaven - it is this part with which the kingdom of heaven is made manifest.

Being broken = being transformed

- At this point I want to give a reassurance about what being broken is about.
- As far as I'm concerned, it's about transformation: being changed.
- Take a loaf of bread, for example.
- One cannot simply shove a whole loaf - even a very small loaf - down one's gullet into the stomach.
- No - it first needs to be broken into smaller pieces - perhaps slices, and even then we still take bites and chew them up before swallowing.
- This transformation of the bread is obviously necessary to enable the bread to nurture us.
- We also need to divide a loaf up so that a number of people can benefit from it.
- We are used to good changes happening in many different ways.
- A kernel of corn needs to change, either to be popped in hot oil to become popcorn, or put in the ground where it can send a root down and a green shoot up to become a new plant.
- A caterpillar changes many times, from egg to grub, to chrysalis, to butterfly - each stage of transformation needing to be broken for the next stage to emerge.

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- I have learnt that resisting transformation tends to be painful, while recognising the need to engage with transformation can be really helpful.
- I'm sure we all know people who have resisted some change in their lives, and usually this has not been helpful to them.
- And conversely, when people have accepted and engaged with transformation they have been blessed by it.

Transformation is familiar

- Here's another example of a series of transformations that we'd be familiar with:
- from dependent child, to independent adult, to committed spouse or partner, to being a parent, and perhaps to being a grandparent.
- The more fully we accept and engage with each of these changes, the more we will be blessed in them.
- This can be more obvious when it *doesn't* happen.
- I once encountered a deeply unhappy marriage that came to an end because the wife had never transformed from being a dependent child - and her parents encouraged her to maintain her dependency on them.
- That marriage could have been really blessed, because the husband was a very giving man - but it needed the woman's relationship with her parents to be broken - to be transformed - in order for that blessing to be made manifest.
- She couldn't face up to that aspect of herself being broken, and so denied herself - and her husband - that blessing.
- The consequence was that the wider community was also denied the blessing of the good marriage it could have been.
- There was another consequence, in that the husband eventually acknowledged this reality of his so-called marriage, and then went through the pain of divorce.
- This too was a transformation, that enabled him to make a new marriage, for which I was able to acknowledge God's blessing.

The feast of the real Presence

- The particular kinds of brokenness, or transformation, that I think are most applicable to the Eucharist model, are especially with regard to our relationship with God:
- the extent to which each of us works with God to become more fully the person God desires us to be.
- And this is why, certainly in our communion-centric Christianity, both the Eucharist - and this Gospel story, are so important for us.
- This feast - regardless of whether we are talking about the feasting of the five thousand men, in addition to all the women and children who were there as well!, or whether we are talking about the feast we share in in the sacrament of the Eucharist - this feast is the festival of the kingdom of heaven.
- Those who sat down and enjoyed the abundance of loaves and fishes, and we who share in the abundance of God's blessing through the Communion feast, are all tangibly participating in the kingdom of heaven.
- Just imagine if we could take a time-machine back to one of those moments when the thousands were being fed by Jesus.
- Knowing what we know now, we'd be sitting there, saying: 'This is great! Here we are, already enjoying heaven on earth, in the presence of our Lord!'

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- So too, when we participate in the Eucharist, and when we make our own act of communion - even vicariously through this virtual participation by visually and audibly joining in with me by video - when we participate in communion in whatever way possible, we can also say: 'This is great! Here we are, already enjoying heaven on earth, in the presence of our Lord!'

Twelve baskets full

- One final observation to make, before I move back to the start of today's Gospel story, is about the symbolism of the twelve baskets full of leftovers.
- In the original context of the story, of the Jewish Jesus feeding the thousands of people from Judaea, the twelve baskets can be simply understood as being sufficient for all twelve tribes of Israel.
- That is, God's abundance provides enough - not only for those immediately present, but symbolically for the whole nation, for all the people of God.
- God's abundance is not simply enough, but is more than enough.
- This concludes the main focus of today's sermon.

The need for respite

- However, there is an opportunity to briefly explore what is described before Jesus feeds the five thousand.
- The Gospel passage starts with Jesus hearing about his cousin and colleague, John the Baptist, who had been imprisoned by Herod.
- Herod had John killed, and some of John's disciples went to Jesus and told him.
- Jesus responds by taking himself off quietly to be alone.
- It would appear that he still had some disciples with him, but he clearly wanted time to grieve the death of the man who baptised him - who effectively enabled Jesus' own transformation.
- I imagine that he probably needed to reconsider what he was doing, and how he was going about it - and additionally, probably needing some respite from active ministry.
- And yet, no sooner does he arrive at the place where he hoped for some solitude, than he finds a crowd waiting to be given God's blessing.
- And even in this moment he acknowledges the continuation of his ministry: Jesus has compassion for these people who come to him in need, and he enables many of them to be restored to wholeness.

- There are other times in the Gospel accounts when Jesus is able to step out of active ministry - to have a time of respite from what he is called to.
- But, on this particular occasion, the need that is so evident to Jesus, compels him to engage once more with what God has called him to.

Like Jesus, others keep responding to need

- As I bring this sermon to an end, I only want to remind you of how this kind of compassion still compels people today.
- I want to acknowledge all those people who are currently doing what Jesus did - people who feel called to help others, and to go on and on helping in line with their work.
- Here I am thinking about medical staff, around the world and Australia, and particularly in our metropolitan community of greater Melbourne, who are putting in extra effort and extra time, for people who are unwell - particularly with those who are suffering from the coronavirus.
- There are the staff of residential aged care facilities, and also child care and kindergartens, who are being overwhelmed by the challenges of the sanitisation and isolation protocols.

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- Police officers who are doing extra to try to keep people safe.
- Social workers, and faith leaders who keep responding to the needs of people who call on them.
- Local government leaders, and state and federal leaders, who are putting in extra time and effort to try to address the conflicting demands of the responsible and irresponsible citizens, and those with the conflicting demands of needing to earn a living and also needing to stay safe from becoming infected.
- We pray that all these people who are motivated by a duty of care, are given the appreciation, and support, and encouragement, and consideration, that they deserve - and that they may have opportunities for respite, and that God may bless them.