



**Reading: Matthew 14:13 – 21**

**Date: August 2**

### **Feeding the World**

*You will all be familiar with Father Bob Maguire, a colourful character. I experienced his charm and casual irreverence at a conference in Geelong back in 2006. He was talking about the meal program at his church in South Melbourne and raised the question, “Which was the true communion, the mass for 20 parishioners in the church or the sausage sizzle for 200 in the hall behind?”*

As much as we want to make the feeding of the thousands by the lake to be a foreshadow of the communion, with Jesus sacramentally offering thanks, breaking the bread and handing it to the disciples, the reality of his compassion and the instruction to the disciples to feed the people drag us back to the real world of hunger. “Don’t send them away to fend for themselves, you feed them!”

Jesus was trying to find some alone time to consider the threat of Herod. Herod, who had already had John killed and now had the bizarre idea that Jesus was John back from the dead! A mad king is even more dangerous than a powerful one! He takes to the water and finds a secluded place. The text calls it a deserted place and our minds think wilderness because we want to connect this story to the tales of Israel in the wilderness, or Elijah in the wilderness, or Jesus and John in the wilderness. But it’s hard to imagine wilderness on the shores of a lake – Jesus tells the people to sit down on the grass - and the disciples talk of near-by villages, so secluded must simply mean not next to a town. It is still close enough to towns and villages for the eager crowds to follow Jesus; the little boat journey must have been visible from the shore. And it was close enough to towns and villages for the for it still to be daylight and time for Jesus to minister to their needs for healing. So, when it gets to evening, the thoughts turn to food. We are not told in the story if anyone in the crowd complained of being hungry, it is only a concern for the disciples. And maybe it is only an excuse concern. Their real concern is that it’s been a long day and they are tired and want the crowd to go away. They are concerned that Jesus was looking for solitude and rest, and they want the crowd to go away. And they know they don’t have the resources to feed all the people if they do start to complain of being hungry, so they want the crowd to go away. But Jesus takes them at their word and says, “You give them something to eat.”

A story about Jesus having compassion and healing the people suddenly becomes a lesson in discipleship. “You give them something to eat”, immediately brings the answer from the disciples that they only have minimal resources; five loaves and two fish. And they discover that minimal resources offered to God in thanks can bring about an abundance beyond need. Thousands of people fed, and scraps left over! Now there are people who have a difficulty with Biblical miracles and look for ‘what really happened.’ And the obvious explanation is that the disciples’ willingness to offer their meagre rations to feed the crowd guilts other people into offering what they had, and so it becomes a communal meal. Those who have share with those who have not. But, in terms of

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discipleship and lessons for the church, what's the difference? This is still the work of God and the Spirit to bring out care and love and sharing through the actions of faithful disciples demonstrating the generosity of God. This is 'love your neighbour' demonstrated and emulated. That the Early Church understood this lesson is shown in the accounts in the first chapters in Acts. People sharing their goods and resources so that all can live. Responding to God's generosity by setting up the means to feed the poor, the widows, and the orphans.

A few commentators point to some clumsy story construction here, as Matthew tries to set the context of this story via the account of Herod's killing of John. Is Jesus seeking alone time to grieve John's death or withdrawing out of concern over Herod's reaction to Jesus ministry? But I don't think this is clumsy writing. This is brilliant story construction to place side by side an account of a royal banquet, with all the symbols of power and status and exclusion and corruption, and the story of this inclusive, generous, and life-giving banquet by the sea. The true king setting aside his personal needs and feeding the people, rather than the pretend king worried about his position and power.

Now, even with all that explanation about the reality of life and hunger and need, we cannot totally ignore the sacramental and spiritual teaching in this story. This is a rich narrative that talks about feeding hunger at the same time as it talks about feeding spiritual hunger at the same time as it points to the identity of Jesus at the same time as it references the ongoing nature of God the true shepherd. It is the richness of this story that has it included in all the Gospels. And, while Acts shows that the church understood about feeding the hungry, the same accounts also show that they understood the sacramental as well, and the people 'broke bread' regularly as spiritual feeding. The Early Church honoured the richness of the accounts of Jesus life by attending to both the physical needs of people and the spiritual needs. Addressing both hunger and spiritual hunger. A lesson that the church throughout the centuries has regularly forgotten, in both directions! Churches that have grand sacramental communion services but no outreach to the poor and hungry in their surrounding community. Or the Salvation Army that feeds the poor but doesn't celebrate communion. Bob Maguire might talk of a difference between the mass and the sausage sizzle but aren't both needed, and shouldn't both be connected? Invite the people eating sausages into the mass. Or celebrate the mass during the sausage sizzle.

Hunger. The big issue of our world and our culture. While on the one hand, a dominant part of our political culture says that if you are poor and hungry it's your own fault for not working hard enough, on the other hand our modern culture says that life is empty and meaningless and you just have to live your best life. And this story of Jesus and the crowd says that discipleship calls us to both forms of hunger. In love for God we celebrate and commemorate the spiritual feeding of the communion sacrament, and in love for neighbour we reach out to the poor and feed the hungry. It's a task made much more difficult in this time of isolation, but it is our calling to feed the world; to follow our shepherding God and bring people to green pastures and still waters.

**Rev Ross Pearce ©**

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