

*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...*

In Isaiah and Matthew this morning we have two stories of meals, meals of a particular quality: meals at which there is plenty to eat. Isaiah speaks in cosmic tones: the poetic description of a meal, in which God calls his people to gather at his table to seal the renewal of his covenant with him. Matthew gives us something miraculous, but a scene described in earthy rather than cosmic tones. Jesus, having heard of the murder of his cousin John, withdraws by boat to a secluded place but is found out by the crowds who greet him on the shore. Rather than getting back into the boat and making a speedy retreat to find his desired solitude, we read a beautiful statement: he saw the crowd and he had compassion for them. Jesus spends the day with this crowd, curing the sick. As evening descends we're not told anything directly about the crowd, but the disciples it seems are getting restless. Don't these people have homes? Aren't they hungry? There's nothing out here in the middle of nowhere for them to eat!

It's the perfect teachable moment, because of course Jesus tells them to do the impossible: 'you give them something to eat'. What do you think their reply was like? Exasperated? Bewildered? 'We've nothing here but five loaves and two fish. What do you mean give them something to eat?' Now the earthy scene of the compassionate Jesus with the crowd is transformed into a moment of transcendence: completely in the moment, addressing the needs of the moment, and bringing that moment into contact with the greatness and awesomeness of God. Jesus calls the crowd to take a seat—the verb in fact is recline, the word commonly used for those seated at formal banquets. He then takes those few loaves of bread in his hands, looks to heaven, blesses and breaks them and gives them to the disciples for them to distribute to the crowds. And all ate and were filled, about 5,000 men plus women and children. A miraculous meal is for the crowds the conclusion of their day spent with the compassionate Jesus. Where could you imagine yourself in this scene? A sick person who came for healing? Perhaps a family member who has struggled to bring along your hurting loved one, in the hope of meeting Jesus? A confused and bewildered disciple, wondering how all this need is going to be met? Person number 5,000, sitting on the ground and contemplating with astonishment the bread that you hold, wondering how so little was able to feed so many?

We find references to food and meals throughout the Bible. That's not surprising; food is a central part of human experience. Food represents care, nurture and hospitality. The patriarch Abraham encounters God in a sacred meal. The Israelites are miraculously provided with food during their desert wanderings. The prophet Elijah, when on the run because of his ministry, is first fed by ravens and later by a widow whose jar of flour and oil miraculously never run out while the whole country is in the midst of famine. In a foreshadowing of our story today, the prophet Elisha feeds 100 people with 20 barley loaves, and ends up with some to spare. But food can also represent a danger. The Israelites were given commandments regarding what food was allowed them and what they were to avoid. And think back to our first ancestors, Adam and Eve. It was eating forbidden food that got them into trouble and caused them to be expelled from paradise. Jesus, after his 40 days of fasting in the wilderness following his baptism, is confronted with temptation, the first of which is food. The devil taunts him to display his power. Turn stones into bread, if you are the Son of God. Jesus answers: 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'.

Our need for food, the hunger we experience, is a daily, physical reminder of our human limitations. Hunger reminds us of our fragility. It reminds us of our dependency on that which is outside to ourselves. Physical hunger, in a healthy setting, is part of the relationship of care that we receive in our families and communities. Yet our physical, natural hunger, when pushed to extremes can also drive us to destructive behaviours. Physical hunger runs alongside and is bound up with our emotional and psychological needs as human beings. Perhaps we seek comfort by overindulging in food or drink, or perhaps try to calm our fears and insecurities by punishing our bodies with harsh treatment, to prove we have the mastery of ourselves. But hunger, and the awareness of our limitations that it brings, has all the potential to bring us to God. Our deepest hungers are satisfied in God, in whose image we are made. Author CS Lewis, for years a committed atheist before converting to Christianity, puts it this way: 'If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.' Lewis' observation is not new, it is a restating of something ancient. In our own reading this morning, Isaiah declares the forthright invitation of God, 'Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good and delight yourselves in right food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.'

Elsewhere in scripture we find a similar invitation to God's banquet, contrasted with a compelling counter-invitation to follow the way of the world. In the book of Proverbs, Wisdom goes out into the city streets and calls to all to come and partake of her banquet, 'Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight'. Folly, or foolishness, sends out a rather different invitation and seeks to draw the faithful away from the true path, 'Stolen water is sweet,' she says, 'and bread eaten in secret is pleasant'. Responding to Wisdom's invitation leads to life, while Folly leads to death. As I said before, our hungers, our limitations, can drive us in different directions, perhaps without even realising at first. Wisdom's admonition is to be conscious of our need, to acknowledge our lack, and step by step to choose the way of life.

As we prepare to gather at the Lord's Table this morning, we bring our focus back to our reading from Matthew. Jesus, in compassion, ministers to and meets the needs of a sick and hungry crowd of people. He dignifies this crowd, calling them to order and to be seated as guests at a formal banquet. Jesus takes what is available, meagre though it is, and in his hands that little becomes enough to satisfy all those hungry stomachs, with some to spare as well. He involves his disciples, giving them the blessed and broken bread to distribute to the crowds.

The invitation is before us. Bring your hunger, your limitation, your questions, your brokenness to Jesus. Answer the invitation of Wisdom and let your needs be met at this table. As you receive, know Jesus' strengthening and guidance to walk in his way so that you become the extension of his love and care, of his healing and provision, for the spiritual and physical needs of the world.