

*Isaiah 55:1-5, Romans 9:1-5, Matt 14: 13 – 21*

Isaiah's invitation to "all who thirst" was made to the Jewish community in exile in Babylon some 25 centuries ago. It was made in God's name – an invitation to come for nourishment, for teaching, for love, for service to the world. Through its inclusion in our Bibles, it becomes universal – an invitation to all who thirst for a release from fear, pain and injustice, to all who seek goodness, truth and beauty. God offers flourishing and justice for all, if only we will come to be nourished and so become part of God's love. Come, receive without payment, because God loves you and has work for you to do – you are to extend God's love ever wider, until all respond and are fed.

To the people of Israel, Isaiah goes on to promise world leadership. As Christians we are taught that this pledge to the people of the covenant was fulfilled in Christ, giving rise to the growth of the Church – or, as some would prefer, of "the Jesus movement", including Jews and Gentiles alike.

Isaiah's theme and the metaphor of feeding is a strong one, firmly rooted in our need for bodily food to give us strength for all the demands life makes on us.

It returns forcefully in Jesus' feeding of the five thousand, a central event in all four gospels, when a huge crowd are so hungry for Jesus' healing and his deeds of power that after a long day on the remote shoreline, they are in danger of fainting for lack of physical food. Just as we might, the disciples suggest that Jesus send them away to get some refreshment. But that is not God's way.

Jesus refuses to dismiss the crowd. "You give them something to eat", he commands. And we can almost hear his impatience at their response that five loaves and two fish is all they have: "Bring them here to me". And the crowds are fed, with baskets of leftovers to spare.

The message for today, it seems to me, is that God will work only through what we offer, requiring us to be partners in the continuing work of caring for creation and for one another. There will be no miracles without our offering and our participation. What does that say to us about famine in Africa, the continued advance of climate change, about refugees drowning in the Mediterranean, and our grudging welcome for those seeking a home here in Ireland?

We may, like the disciples, hope that the hungry crowds will go away and find themselves something to eat – even pray that God would arrange this. But no; Jesus says, “You give them something to eat.”

Many of you will share my experience of harvesting numerous appeals from charities through the front door each week. We already give regularly to some of them; surely the rest can go in the bin? But Jesus says: “You give them something to eat.” God only gives from what we offer; so as long as there is hunger, thirst and suffering in the world, he calls us to keep sharing – in this or some other way.

So much for physical hunger and its demands. But that’s only the beginning. What about spiritual hunger? What about the “famine of hearing the word of the Lord”, announced by the prophet Amos, as he castigates the self-indulgence of the wealthy in ancient Israel? Human nature doesn’t seem to have changed very much. And for Isaiah in today’s reading, just as for Jesus in the Gospels, “bread” carries the meaning of spiritual sustenance, the word of God.

Later in the gospel story, Jesus contrasts the physical bread he has given the crowd, with “the true bread from heaven” – that is, with himself as God’s word and presence. In declaring himself “the bread of life” Jesus offers himself as the one who satisfies our deepest needs.

The sacred quality of bread in Jewish worship - the “bread of the presence”, the “shew-bread”, the unleavened bread of the Passover - is magnified in the Christian eucharist, where bread is blessed, broken and shared to affirm that Christ, the bread of life, is now present in every one who eats of it. Once again, if only for a little time, we become the Body of Christ, invited to make Christ present to all around us, to become bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh, loving and caring in the world.

There’s no doubt that Matthew intended his story of the feeding of the 5,000 to refer not only to that actual occasion, but to the Last Supper Jesus shared with his disciples, and to the eucharistic worship of the Church that followed. This is clear from Jesus’ actions with the food the disciples offer him. He TAKES the loaves, BLESSES them, BREAKS them and GIVES them to the disciples, who then give them to the hungry crowd. The same sequence of taking, blessing, breaking

and sharing, is still an essential part of every celebration of Holy Communion 20 centuries later.

This brings us to consider our style of worship in this time of continuing pandemic. We are fortunate here in Christ Church Cathedral. After a relatively short time of eucharistic famine, we can gather again, though with strict precautions, to receive the sacrament which makes us one in Christ, which offers us strength and inspiration for the coming week. Others are not so lucky. Many parishes are still confining their worship to Morning Prayer and some churches are still closed. For those accustomed to receiving communion regularly, the famine may become intolerable unless a way is found to provide some effective sign of the spiritual nourishment they crave. Tentatively at first, and then with a little more confidence, but always with great care, clergy of various backgrounds have been evolving ways to feed them.

Given the continued warnings against physical contact of any kind, can we conceive of such a thing as a “virtual eucharist”? I believe that we can; for although nothing can fully replace the experience of receiving bread on one’s palm directly from the celebrant, we must remember that God is Spirit, is not confined by space and its limitations, and can bless us without the physical presence of an intermediary!

If there is no physical presence, then, at least we can claim *temporal* presence. A blessing is more convincingly received at the instant it is offered, than if experienced next day on a recording. For this reason, the live-streaming from this cathedral has been helpful and I hope will continue to be so.

Yet for many, this is not enough; because live-streaming or services on television leave the viewer as a mere spectator. We may hear the sermon, identify with the intercessions, and attend to the eucharistic prayer, but we cannot receive the sacrament, nor can we be recognised as participating in the service or feel part of the assembly. Something more is needed to make us truly part of the worshipping community.

It is the sharing of consecrated bread and wine, the body of Christ, that is central. How can it be achieved remotely? One way is to invite all participants to prepare their own bread and wine, and if possible a candle, and have them in front

of them as they watch the service. Also to include a specific prayer inviting those at home to hold up their elements for the consecration. Since God is not limited by space, consecration over the internet presents no difficulties beyond those of our own literalistic imaginations. Many people have been greatly blessed by this and participate regularly even with services in other countries where they have worshipped in the past.

Yet there remains something missing here too – the sense of community. Which brings me to a word which some of you may dread: “ZOOM”! If you haven’t participated in a zoom meeting, let alone a zoom eucharist, or if you are even mildly technophobic, you may reject the idea out of hand. But I hope you’ll think again.

There are different types of “zoom” service, some of them strictly according to the Prayer Book, and others more akin to an “agape” meal in the style of early Christian “breaking bread in one another’s homes”, as described in the Acts of the Apostles. But common to them all is that each worshipper or family of worshippers is welcomed by the presider as they enter the zoom meeting; all can greet one another on screen before the worship begins, and continue to be aware of each other’s presence, sharing the Peace, and saying goodbye after the final blessing. A few participants will read lessons or prayers, or even share a reflection after the Gospel. All will offer and break their bread together as the celebrant does so. Thus real-time communal worship can be experienced, despite our physical distance.

Some might be uneasy at such developments - afraid that they could discourage church attendance. But since such styles of participation are now possible, who are we to fearfully deny such food for the hungry? Should we not perhaps be thinking how best to continue such services, specifically for the housebound, even after the dangers of physical contact are past?

“Ho every one who thirsts – come to the waters. You that have no money - you who cannot be physically present for whatever reason - come buy and eat! Incline your ear, and come to me, listen that you may live!”

This is the word of the Lord, who is the bread of life. Amen.