

Not your King

6 August 2023

Trinity 9

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Isaiah 55.1-5

Romans 9.1-5

Matthew 14.13-21

Free Food

I have always loved that introduction to Isaiah 55:

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.

There is a basic human need for food and God knows our needs. The twist is that it will be given without demanding a payment.

I have always thought this is the root of Harvest Thanksgiving. The life within the seed, the nourishment of the soil and the provision of rain are all largely beyond our control. The source of our food is a gift. There is then the work in cultivating a crop, harvesting it and taking it to market. But we are paying handling charges. The true provision of the food is a gift.

And food is wonderful.

Goodness

Each day we need food to give us health and strength. We need care in choosing what we eat and how we prepare it. There is a labour of love here. There is all the difference in providing food and creating a meal.

I like the story of a diner at the Savoy in London who asked to see the chef. The great man Escoffier came and was asked for the recipe of the delicious dessert. He gave it. Several weeks later the diner returned and asked to see the chef. Escoffier again arrived. The diner complained 'I have taken your recipe and prepared the dessert several times and it is never as good as I had here'. 'Ah' Escoffier said 'I gave you the recipe but I did not teach you how to cook'.

Food is not obvious. It takes many skills to make meals wonderful. But food is also about community. It is not only what you eat but with whom you eat it. On Friday Gill and I had a wonderful lunch with friends we have known for nearly thirty years. We had planned the date

carefully and our time together was hugely enjoyable. The food was good too.

It is just as true about church life. In September we will be celebrating St. Mary's 160th anniversary and that will include eating together. There is a planning meeting this week. It will not just happen.

Jesus put food in the list of concerns we are to ask God for. In the Lord's Prayer we are to say 'give us this day our daily bread'. We are not to take food for granted. We are to see it as our Heavenly Father's provision for our health, strength and society. And no doubt great pleasure too; for food is a huge enjoyment to be relished.

Trouble

But food can also be a source of trouble.

It will take work by the farmer, the distributor, the shop keeper and person who cooks. Who will do this work? How will they be paid and thanked? This raises issues of economics and so often the workers have not been fairly treated. The prophets of the Old Testament have much to say about this.

We have been especially conscious about people being hungry in our society, one of the world's wealthiest. There have been food banks for many years. St. Mary's has a box the back to contribute to our local one. There is a cost of living crisis that is not experienced equally. This puts pressure on people's ability to eat.

With the conflict in Ukraine Russia has been controlling shipping so food is not distributed. Food can be a political tool and an instrument of war.

Food underlines how we are all human and have basic needs and yet this gets distorted and there are great questions about what the value is of human life.

King by force?

Our Gospel reading was about Jesus feeding a multitude. The crowd had been out in the countryside all day and they were famished. Jesus' disciples would have them sent home. But Jesus said they needed to be fed. Jesus takes a small amount of food, blesses it and it is distributed to everybody. There are various explanations given of what took place.

The first one is that it was a work of wonder, a miracle, it demonstrated Jesus power. Using power to meet need is part of human life.

The second explanation is that Jesus by being generous persuaded people to share what they had. On the one hand the laws of nature are not broken. But on the other hand the laws of human selfishness are broken. I wonder which is the bigger achievement?

There is a further explanation which is that Jesus invited people to have a fragment of the food on offer and so symbolically expressed the love of God's Kingdom. I'm not quite sure how from this you get the many baskets full of scraps to collect. But that expression of God's love and community sounds good.

The accounts of the feeding of the multitude is unique. Except for the resurrection, it is common to all four Gospels. Saint John's Gospel is very different as apart from the final days of Jesus' ministry he has his own accounts to give and meanings to supply.

In John's account of the feeding of the multitude he adds a particular extra detail:

When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.' When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. John 6.14,15

In all of the gospels this is a characteristic of Jesus. He does not want to be taken hold off. He does not want people to take their meanings of leadership and press them on him. Jesus knows the power of crowds. He also knows the manipulations of the powerful. The crowd want to make him their king. Jesus sees it the other way round. They must understand the type of king he is and that this the only one they are to accept.

Jesus has his own path

You see this right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. When he is tempted three times by the devil to accept a particular way of power Jesus declines each of them.

Jesus performs many wonderful works but will quite often not use them for publicity. When he heals Jairus' daughter He orders her parents not to tell anybody.

Jesus goes to the home of Simon the Pharisee. When a woman with low reputation comes in Simon is evidently discomforted. How easy it would be just scold him. Righteous indignation seems like a good way to do it. But Jesus tells a parable and wants Simon to work it out for himself.

On the one hand Jesus taught with authority and so drew admiration from people. But on the other hand he treated each situation as it presented itself. It can make Jesus look inconsistent or missing a great opportunity.

So often there are leaders who want to appeal to the people They will use popular issues and oversimplified presentations. We must be careful about leaders who scapegoat part of the population, exaggerate dangers, are evasive about difficult consequences and seek to be down to earth when their backgrounds are very privileged. There is the character of the demagogue. It comes from the Greek, demos meaning people, and agoge which means leader. They can raise a great deal of attention, loyalty and action. But the lack of clear foundations and appealing to emotionalism can make them burn out very quickly and quite often very disastrously.

Jesus knows there are populist short cuts and he is not prepared to use them.

Choose your king carefully

Jesus warned his followers and all who come after him to be on guard about false Messiahs (eg. Matthew 7.15). The point he is making is about being led astray. In our day these people are rarely a sort of religious leader. But they are people of power who can be very destructive. They may be a significant political person in the nation. They may be a particularly persuasive person in our own circle. The question is do they match up to the wisdom and compassion of Jesus?

I think this is why we are practising Christians. We are Christians because of who Jesus is and he is the measure by which we judge life. But we are people who will practice our faith. Life is big and complicated and we're prepared to spend the time and do the thinking to learn the lessons and to receive what Jesus says is abundant life.

I don't mean this just to be a sales pitch for Christian worship. I hope the life of the church inspires us in our faith. But just as Jesus gave parables for people to find the answer we need to

be in the place for his encouragement, challenge and at times admonition to be available.

Not by bread alone

We have many needs not least for food. Jesus famously said 'you do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God'. There are difficult issues in our society to solve. There are many people who will set themselves up as credible saviours. We are asked to be wise about what is slick, plausible and popular. Jesus knew what was in people's hearts. Both the needs and the trouble.

The wonderful thing is that Jesus comes to invite us into a relationship and any relationship worth its salt is going to take practising. The good news is the practising does not make us perfect. The goodness of God does that. As people who know the way of Jesus we are given a firm foundation for our lives.