

**Readings:** Genesis 32:22-31; Matthew 14:13-21

Text: Matthew 14:16 - Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

The theme: *The miracle of broken bread and transformed and shared lives*

I am not sure how many of you knew that the much loved, late Rev Ian Tanner was a chemist before he entered ministry. When I told him that chemistry was my favourite subject, but I did not to specialise in it, he said, "Well, Apelu, I'll ask God to forgive your sin if you go to ministry." I liked chemistry the most because when we followed the theory in our practicals, it was magical.

The Matthew readings that we have had in July are like a theory about God and God's kingdom. Today's reading and the readings in the coming Sundays are like lessons on the practical application of that theory.

In today's reading, Jesus had heard that Herod had killed John the Baptist. Upon hearing this sad news, he withdrew to a deserted place, but the crowds followed him. When he saw the people, he felt compassion for them. So, he cured their sick. When evening loomed, the disciples told him to send the people away so they could buy food for themselves. But he told the disciples, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." And they said, "We have nothing, but five loaves and two fish." So he told the disciples to bring the fish and the loaves to him as he ordered the people to sit down on the grass. Then he took the loaves and the fish; he looked up to heaven; he blessed and broke the loaves; he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. All ate and were filled. They collected the left-over of the broken pieces, filling twelve baskets. About 5000 men, plus the women and children, were in the crowd.

That is my summary of today's reading from Matthew. It's a well-known story, because we have heard it so many times. Scholars believe the feeding did happen. But how Jesus fed, perhaps, 10,000 people with 5 loaves and two fish is another matter. I am sure you are familiar with some of the explanations of what might have happened. Hold on to those explanations, but let me offer another possibility.

I think many people brought something to eat, but the poor did not. So, when Jesus said, "Let's break for dinner", Peter came running to him, saying, "What about them?" And Jesus said, "Who them?" Peter pointed to a group of poor people, about 10 meters away. Jesus looked up and he saw Lazarus. And he said, "Oh! Lazarus and his mob. Well, you give them something to eat." And Peter said, "But we have nothing; only 5 loaves and two fish."

Seven-year old Sam overheard the conversation. He looked at his food and the unrealistic confidence that we find in children made him think his dinner could feed Lazarus and his group. So, he yelled out, "Here, Peter! They can have my food." Sam was so loud that everyone stopped and looked. Sam got up and ran towards Jesus and Peter with food in hand. And then, little Hayley joined Sam, and so did the other children. The adults looked at each other, and they remembered what Jesus had shared with them about God and God's kingdom. Though they grew up knowing that the righteous should not eat with the sinners, one by one, they offered their dinner to be shared, until everyone put their food together and all shared what they had brought with them. That was the miracle: the people who would, normally, not

eat with the poor [the sinners] changed their hearts and minds and shared their food with the poor. Add that to your collection of theories about what might have, actually, happened.

Now, the way Matthew tells his stories makes it so easy for the reader to focus elsewhere and not on the main points of a story. It's like a story that economists like to tell, of a man who lost his keys in the dark but looked for it under a street lamp, because there was light. We saw that in the parables and, likewise, in today's reading. Our minds are drawn to the mystery of what might have happened and we ignore the purpose and the rich and deep symbolism. So, let us focus on the lessons and the symbolisms in the story.

For a start, this is the only 'miracle' story that made the cut in all the four gospels. All four evangelists felt it was an important story to tell, because it was the key to understanding Jesus' experience of God and God's kingdom. First, it reminds us about our instinctive responses to people in need, especially the less fortunate and the marginalised. Second, it reminds us about the generosity of God and God's capacity to care, bless and provide. Finally, it reminds us about God's salvation plan and what a life committed to following God's will looks like.

What is our default response to human needs, to people who are hungry, or people seeking refuge from danger? The disciples gave an excellent demonstration. When it was close to dinner, they began to fret that they might have to share their food with some. And when Jesus told them to give the poor something to eat, they invented some weird mathematics. They replied, "We have nothing, but five loaves and two fish." The disciples' maths goes like this: 5 loaves + 2 fish = 0! In words, we do not have enough. This is not how a disciple should respond, based on Jesus' theory of God and God's kingdom.

In Samoan villages, houses are open. You can see people outside and they can see what goes on inside your house. If your family is having a meal and someone walks by, not far from your house, it is rude for you not to invite that person. So, when you cook, you always cook for more than normal for that reason and for people who drop by unannounced. It is also rude for you to just take out your lunch and eat it, without inviting anyone nearby to share your lunch. People usually decline such invitations, but you are expected to, still, make it.

How does God respond to the same situation? Well, Jesus provides a good illustration. When the disciples said they had only 5 loaves and 2 fish, he said to them, "Bring them here to me." He blessed the food and fed the people.

The disciples are now seeing God's kingdom in action. The economics and theology of God's kingdom are very different to that of the world. Where the world sees doom and gloom, Jesus sees possibilities and hope. When the world says there is not enough, God says that, what we have is more than enough.

The pandemic has given us the opportunity to watch ourselves and others respond to real and perceived situations. We have seen the panic buying and the hoarding instincts kick in, as we fear how all might pan out. The government is acting like a god, but we know it is politics and it is our money that they are playing with, anyway. But where is the church? We were all caught unprepared.

What we are seeing, though, happens all the times. The response of rich countries to people from poor and war-torn countries that are looking for refuge and opportunities resembles the

disciples' response to Jesus' question – we have nothing. Yet, many are Christian nations that have benefited from the social, trade and economic systems that they put in place after the Second World War. Even the mostly empty Australia and New Zealand are saying the same. But did we not, all, come from some other places and for the same reasons?

Another practical lesson that the disciples are learning is a lesson on social order. We did not read the first 12 verses of chapter 14, but they provide the context for today's reading. They tell the story of a feast at Herod's house. Only invited guests are included. They are seated and served based on ranks and status, and John the Baptist is murdered as part of the entertainment. In God's kingdom, everyone is included; they all sit on the grass and everyone eats the same food. Oh, and the King cooks and serves!

Today's story is very strong in symbolism. First, we can see the structure of the early church taking shape when they all shared a meal together. The twelve baskets of leftovers and bits and pieces remind one of the 12 tribes of Israel. Here, though, they point to the *Nouveau* Israel, the Church. The 11 disciples, plus Matthias later on, who would become the apostles. They would lead the church, building it from the morsels and discarded bits, like the mustard seed and the discarded fish of last Sunday's reading.

This feeding also reminds us of the manna that Israel ate in the desert, but it also points to the Last Supper, the death and the resurrection of Jesus and, eventually, to the Eucharist or Holy Communion. The words that Jesus used when he received the loaves and the fish are the same words that we use in Communion: he takes; he blesses; he breaks; and he gives. It is exactly what we will be doing later in Holy Communion.

Holy Communion reminds us of the real miracle that happened on that deserted place: the people were fed with the word and the bread of life, and there was more than enough for all. They learnt that, when they shared what little they had, miracles could happen, for the acts of breathing, eating, and drinking are miracles that occur all the times.

The reading challenges us a church. Can we share more of ourselves with other, in addition to the music through the scholarship, the music centre and church music? Can we make more and better use of this fabulous church building as well as our other resources and ourselves?

There is also challenge at the personal level. The late Dutch theologian, Henri Nouwen, has said that, as the bread needs to be broken so all could share it at Communion, the same has to happen to us, also, if we want to share our lives with God and with others, just as we now have life because of Jesus' broken body. I think that was the miracle of broken bread and transformed and shared lives at that deserted place.

For the glory of God.

Amen.