

Sermon Aug 2nd 2020 – Year A - Trinity 8 – Psalm 145; Matthew 14: 13 -21

Food and feasting

Let's think for a moment about food, it plays an important role in our lives, doesn't it? And it's a topical subject at the moment as we think as a nation about what we eat and how poor diet can contribute to poor health and higher risks for those who contract Covid-19. Besides the practical aspect of food as nutrition, food also plays a huge part in our family lives and how we express our cultural identity. Unsurprisingly, food also plays a major role in the Bible. Here are just a small selection of references to food in the Scriptures:

A few examples of practical food and feasting in the Bible:

- Genesis 1, God gives plants and fruit to Adam and Eve for food
- Exodus 16, God gives the Israelites food when he hears their complaints
- Isaiah 1, God promises good food if we are obedient

A few examples of spiritual food and feasting in the Bible:

- John 4, Jesus says that his food is to do the will of the Father who sent him
- John 6, Jesus tells us to work for food that doesn't spoil, the food of eternal life, he says that he is the bread of life, that if we believe in him we'll never go hungry
- Matthew 5, Jesus says blessed are those who hunger after righteousness, for they will be filled
- Revelation 19, The invitation to the marriage feast of the Lamb

Today's readings

In today's readings we see a theme of food and feasting. In the passage from Isaiah 55, the prophet poses a question from God, why do his people spend money on that which is not bread, not true food. Instead, God tells us to listen carefully to him and that our soul should delight in fatness, meaning spiritual joy. This passage then looks ahead to the coming of Jesus, and that Israel, through Jesus, will call other nations to itself to experience God's abundance and love. It also looks to the gathering of God's people in Revelation 21, where in the eternal city, the New Jerusalem, all who are hungry and thirsty are satisfied (more on Revelation 21 later...).

In Psalm 145 we hear how God is gracious, full of compassion, slow to anger and abounding in mercy and loving-kindness, and that if we look to him with expectation, he will us the right give food in due season.

In today's Gospel reading from Matthew we hear of a banquet put on by Herod Antipas, a petty tyrant imposed on the Jews by the Roman Empire. Herod disliked John the Baptist, he feared the influence John had over the people, and especially disliked him because John had

publicly rebuked Herod for marrying his brother's wife, Herodias, so Herod had John imprisoned. Herodias's daughter Salome danced for Herod and, besotted with her, he says he will give her whatever she wants. So, prompted by her mother she asks for John the Baptist's head on a platter. Herod, to save face in front of his guests, agrees and orders John to be beheaded.

When Jesus hears about John's death, he withdraws to a solitary place to grieve, but the crowds find out where he is and follow him out to the wilderness. Jesus has great compassion for the crowds and heals them. Knowing that they need something to eat he takes the gifts of five loaves and two fishes and miraculously multiplies the food so that all eat and are satisfied

Food of empire vs. food of the Kingdom

What a difference there is between the feast that Jesus presides over in the wilderness and the banquet organised by Herod in his palace! Not just in the surroundings, but also in so many other ways. In this passage in Matthew we see the contrast between the food of an evil empire and the food of God's Kingdom. Here are some of the key differences:

Food of empire	Food of God's Kingdom
- Does not last	- It's eternal
- For the host to show off to others	- For the benefit of those who receive
- Based on earthly power which is oppressive and false	- Based on God's compassion and mercy
- Guests need to be important people to be invited	- All are welcome, whoever they are
- Glorifies people, institutions	- Glorifies God

What a contrast we can see here between the food of earthly empire and God's Kingdom, perhaps the most macabre contrast being John the Baptist's head presented on a platter as if it's just another part of the banquet. But the overall message is clear, food of the earthly empire has nothing to offer us, but the food of God's Kingdom, freely offered to all, never spoils and lasts eternally.

The feeding of the 5000

So let's look in more detail at the passage in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus is clearly grieving for John the Baptist, but he's moved by compassion for the crowds who've followed him into the wilderness, so desperate are they to be near him. He heals them, all day, evening comes and the crowds have nothing to eat. So the disciples come to Jesus and give him some advice, telling Jesus to send the crowds away to go and buy food for themselves. Perhaps the disciples

were also moved by compassion for the crowds, their idea seems like a good one, but Jesus has a better plan. I wonder how like those disciples we are sometimes, maybe we have a tendency to give God advice or to come up with what we think is a good plan but we forget to ask God what he wants us to do; in my experience when I align myself to his will, I discover that what I thought in my own mind was a good idea turns out, with God's guidance, not to be so great after all! And if I spend time praying and seeking God's will I usually find he'll show me the right way forward, a way that will glorify him above all.

And in this passage in Matthew's Gospel it seems as if Jesus is gently testing the disciples. He says that the crowds don't need to go away, and he challenges the disciples to give them something to eat. They say that they have nothing here but five loaves and two fishes. Jesus shows them how wrong they are, they have everything they need there, because they have the very presence of Jesus himself. Jesus then takes the loaves and fishes and miraculously multiplies them. Jesus shows them (and us) that we can take whatever small gifts we have, offer them to him, and see him do a miraculous work with them.

I wonder how many times we, you and I, forget how crucial this lesson is for how we live our lives, that when we think we have nothing, we need to offer what we have, however small, to Jesus for his miraculous working. For when Jesus takes the offering of loaves and fishes he gives thanks, looks up to heaven and blesses the gifts, clearly looking ahead to the Last Supper and the Eucharistic Feast that we are honoured and privileged to share in. I don't think it's a coincidence that after this passage in Matthew's Gospel Jesus is seen walking on water, the disciples are terrified when they see this, but Jesus says 'Take courage! I AM!' which is a clear reference to God the Father talking to Moses from the burning bush in Exodus 3; here Jesus wants to show us who he really is. So however small we might think our gifts are, we can offer them in confidence to God, the God of Moses, Abraham and Isaac, the Lamb who died for us on the cross to redeem us, the God who brings all his people to him in the eternal holy city, the New Jerusalem. And that's where we're headed, this holy city. Here's how it's described in Revelation 21:

'I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God... I heard a mighty voice from the throne saying, See! The dwelling place of God is with men, he will encamp among them, they shall be his people, God will be with them and he will be their God. God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. And death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor grief nor pain, for the former things have passed away.'

Final thoughts

So we've looked at the importance of food, both actual food and spiritual food. We've looked at the contrast between food of earthly empire and the everlasting food of God's Kingdom. We've seen how Jesus takes our gifts, however small we think they are, and works miracles with them. And we've seen where we're headed, the holy and eternal city, the New Jerusalem where we will dwell with our God and be his people.

So what does all this mean for us practically? I believe that Jesus shows us what we need to do with reference to God's food of the Kingdom. You'll remember that Jesus, even though

wanting to grieve in peace for John the Baptist was moved by compassion to help and heal the people. You'll remember that Jesus hands the food to the disciples who then gave it to the crowds. What is this Kingdom food that we can hand out in Jesus's name? It could be a gift of real food, a meal for an elderly or vulnerable neighbour, a contribution to a food bank. Or it could be a gift of spiritual food, a kind word to a stranger, giving up our time to help someone less fortunate than ourselves, holding someone in prayer before the Lord, a phone call or message to someone we know who's lonely.

Over the coming week let's all, you and me, be open to feel God's compassion for those around us and be ready to be moved to action, maybe even, as Jesus did, to change our plans. Let's follow Jesus's example and be ready to offer God's Kingdom food to those around us, and, in however small a way, extend God's Kingdom wherever we find ourselves in the coming week.

Let's pray.

Dear Lord, help us to put aside our own plans and desires and fully submit to your will. Help us to be open to the needs of those around us, to be moved by compassion for the needs of others as Jesus was in the wilderness. Help us to offer our gifts, however small we might think they are, to you so that you can take them and miraculously multiply them. Help us to hand out your everlasting Kingdom food to others so that your name may be glorified. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our redeemer and saviour.

Amen.