



Sermon preached by Dr Alan Rickard on 28th July 2024

Trinity IX - Service led by the Worship, Discipleship & Spirituality Group

Readings: 2 Kings 4: 42-44; John 6: 1-21; Ephesians 3: 14-21

My theme for today is Christian Hospitality. Hospitality may be defined as “the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers.”

This is something that forms a significant part of our presence in central Cambridge as Downing Place United Reformed Church, inherited from our distinct yet cognate predecessor institutions of Emmanuel and St Columba’s.

In the Old Testament reading, Elisha feeds one hundred people with twenty loaves of barley bread and fresh grain and has some left over. This is one of several examples in the Old Testament of the miraculous provision of food. Another is the manna from heaven, feeding the Israelites led by Moses in the desert. This is Elisha’s second miracle. It is a miracle of gracious provision by God in time of need and reminds us that all good things in this world come from God. It points us to the far greater miracle of Jesus when he feeds 5000 people from just five loaves of barley bread and two fish.

The 2 Kings reading is part of a narrative complex that depicts the struggle of prophetic figures, Elijah and Elisha, to keep the people of Israel’s focus on serving their God, with whom they had a covenant relationship. The short and somewhat condensed lectionary reading requires a bit of unpacking!

Elijah had initiated this attempt to convince the people of Israel that their God, and not the Canaanite God Baal, was their only true God by demonstrating subtly at first to the people Baal’s impotence and their God’s superiority: announcing a drought as a way to counter belief in Baal as the giver of rain; showing God’s care for people in distress—providing for the Phoenician widow by the miracle of the never failing jar of meal and oil (1 Kings 17:8-16) and reviving her son from near death (1 Kings 17:17-24).

Then Elijah takes head on the proponents of Baal religion with the contest between Baal’s prophets and Elijah at Mt. Carmel (1 Kings 18:1-46).

Elisha, who succeeds Elijah, picks up the mantle of continuing to seek Israel’s loyalty to their God by showing God’s care and power through miracles. In 2 Kings 4 Elisha continues his ministry of rescuing those in distress that initiated his ministry in 2 Kings 2:19-22 when he purified water for a city.

Today’s lectionary reading concludes the chapter that has a series of five miracles. For the first miracle, Elisha is able to give security to a widow in distress because she cannot pay her debts and consequently, her two sons are being threatened with enslavement (2 Kings 4:1-7). The second miracle concerns Elisha’s prophecy that a childless couple would have a child (4:8-17). The third depicts the revival of the child after an illness and death (4:18-37). In the fourth miracle, Elisha successfully detoxified a pot of stew that had been rendered poisonous, for his group of prophets (4:38-41). The fifth miracle is about Elisha’s ability to feed a hundred people with what seems to be a scarce provision (4:42-44).

Miracles four and five share the same context of scarcity from times of famine. The desperate situation in the first story is shown by the fact that when the pot of stew is rendered poisonous, it is not thrown away to be replaced by a fresh pot of stew. Elisha has to doctor the existing pot of stew probably because there is nothing with which to make a fresh pot of

stew. The group of prophets share the detoxified pot of stew. Elisha successfully turned a situation of death into a situation of life-giving. The second story, today's lectionary reading, continues with the theme of scarcity but with an emphasis on sharing.

There is an irony in how the man who brought the food to Elisha is identified as "a man from Baal-Shalishah". Remember, the general setting of the stories of Elijah and Elisha is competition for the religious souls of the Israelite people. The name of the place is attached to Baal, which might reflect that this place was or had become the centre for the worship of Baal in the region of Ephraim. Shalishah is mentioned as one of the countries in the hills of Ephraim (1 Samuel 9:4). What is interesting is that a man from this place "brought food from the first fruits to the man of God." This signals that there were still a few faithful people who were focused on the true worship of their God. According to Leviticus 23:10-14 this offering of the first fruits was given to the priest at the sanctuary. Here this man is giving them to a person who is clearly not a priest. Does this reflect lack of priestly leadership at this time? Elisha was a leader of a prophetic guild that lived at the margins of society. The amount the man brings also seems to be a departure from what was originally instructed. It appears a bit extravagant if he is representing just himself: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain. It is not surprising that Elisha instructs that the food be given to the people because we have already seen him concerned about the well-being of others. The response of the person instructed with setting the food before the people indicates that the amount of the offering is disproportionate to the number of people at the place—a context of scarcity.

How do we expect people to behave in the reality of scarcity? Is there fear of a stampede? These questions bring to memory how some of us behaved

in response to the perceived scarcity of basic needs at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Fear sometimes brings a spirit of individualism that disregards the needs of others and ignores the connections among us. A spirit of hoarding consumed the nation and empty supermarket shelves testified to perceived scarcity.

In the case of Elisha and the 100 people with him, when food was set before them, everyone ate and there was even some left over! Why? Maybe because people only took what they needed and were not hoarding for the next day. I imagine that there was a spirit of community and orderliness guided by Elisha's trust in a God who had continuously demonstrated faithfulness in the face of unfaithfulness by the majority.

Indeed, the faithfulness of a few can serve a multitude and a spirit of sharing can be a sign of the loving presence of God in a context of real or perceived scarcity.

We now turn the dial up for the New Testament reading. One hundred people to be fed by Elisha become five thousand fed by Jesus and his disciples by the sea of Galilee! And yet, the provision is dialed down: twenty loaves of barley and first ears of grain provided by the man from Baal-Shalishah are reduced to the boy's provision of five barley loaves and two fish. The translation of fish here actually refers to a dried and pickled fish eaten as a titbit with bread.

The miracle story of the feeding of the five thousand is alone among such gospel narratives in appearing in all four gospels! John follows the accounts of Mark and Matthew rather than of Luke at least in the respect that he follows the feeding of the five thousand miracle with the miraculous walking on the water. The crowd, so impressed with the ample provision of food, tried to make Jesus their 'messianic' king. But he withdrew alone into the hills. His disciples meantime set out by boat before sunset for the far shore of the lake. After nightfall they were surprised by a storm and while it was raging were frightened to see Jesus walking on the water towards them. Jesus reassured them by saying "It is I, do not be afraid". Thus the

evangelist prepares for the discourse which is to follow in which Jesus states that he is himself the real bread by which men really live. The saying 'it is I', or 'I am', anticipates the later predicates of the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, and the true vine. Jesus is thus showing his disciples that he needs no resources outside himself in order to bring his people the succour and salvation that they need.

It has often been claimed that the discourse in John chapter 6 is really a 'eucharistic' discourse. Certainly John is writing here from what is termed an 'end-perspective'.

But the end-perspective is used to look at an actual historical situation, an occasion when Jesus fed the five thousand miraculously. The result presents a three dimensional perspective, one from the past, referring to the Old Testament, one from the then present, set out over the contemporary celebration of the Jewish Passover, and the last perspective is the Christian end-perspective including the cross, the resurrection, the ascension, the gift of the Spirit and the celebration of the eucharist in the church at Ephesus. John is thus able to give body and depth to the synoptic narrative and expose for his readers those deeper truths about the historic occasion that they might have otherwise missed.

And so, according to biblical scholars, John has provided a most discerning and valuable commentary on the synoptic record. Jesus is the bread of life!

And so, finally to the prayer in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, variously entitled a prayer for the Church, a prayer to Christ and a prayer for the Readers.

The content of the prayer is twofold, The apostle prays for the Gentile audience and also invokes the indwelling Christ, who comes to make his home in the church. God's power may be seen at work in the church in which God's fullness dwells by the present of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

There is an assortment of metaphors - 'rooted' is horticultural, denoting a firm bed in which plants are set, 'grounded' is architectural, ensuring a strong base on which a superstructure rests and rises, and there are terms taken from the intellectual and moral universe such as 'knowledge' and 'love'. According to Ralph P Martin, for Paul of the letter to the Ephesians, Christ and his congregation are not two separate entities, but are so closely conjoined that it would be permissible to write of one corporate whole. Christ-in-his-church. Indeed this is the genius of this epistle's ecclesiology.

In conclusion, may I reiterate what Martin refers to as the sublime doxology of verses 20 and 21:

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen

Alan Rickard