

Jesus feeds us so we can feed the world

Sermon by Andy Wurm, Pentecost 10, 29th July 2018

In 1999 a film called *10 Things I Hate About You* was produced. It was based upon William Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. While a great film in many ways, it was criticized for maintaining the idea that a strong-willed woman needed to change her strong-willed personality if she was to snag a boyfriend. That was the way it was in Shakespeare's play, but it was thought to be an inappropriate message for 1999. In 2016 author Anne Tyler published her novel *Vinegar Girl*, which was also based on Shakespeare's play, but the difference was that in *Vinegar Girl*, the heroine didn't give up being strong in order to get a man. In light of domestic violence and when strong women can still be considered aggressive, that's a better message.

Today, in our gospel story of Jesus feeding a crowd of five thousand, we have a kind of *Vinegar Girl*-version of a more ancient hero, for the gospel writer is presenting Jesus as the new Moses. For the people of Jesus' time, Moses was big. He was the one to look to, in order to know God. To tap into people's love for God through their adoration of Moses, the gospel writer simply presents Jesus as the new Moses. The old Moses was good, but this one's better.

Moses led his people on their journey from slavery in Egypt to new life in the Promised Land. Their food for the journey came from God. It was bread from heaven. Moses prayed and God provided. Each morning the people went out from their camp and collected it. But it was only enough sustenance for the day. It didn't last until the next day. They had to collect a fresh lot the next day.

Now, in Jesus, we have the new Moses, and here, in this gospel story, he is providing bread, just like the old Moses, except, old Moses provided bread to sustain people on the way to the Promised Land, whereas new Moses provides bread at the Promised Land. Now no-one has to travel anywhere to be blessed by God, rather, they are already blessed and so strengthened by God. God is already with them, wherever they are.

The story of Jesus feeding five thousand seems like a story telling us he's a kind of catering superman. He can out-cater anyone! But that's not the point of the story, rather, the gospel-writer is using the story to tell us who he thinks Jesus is, and here he's telling us that Jesus is the heavenly food which gives us all the nourishment we need – not just for when life is going well, but even when it's stormy and frightening – hence he adds another story on the end about Jesus coming to those who trust him when life is tough.

The account of the feeding of the five thousand is a story version of what we do in the eucharist – we take bread, give thanks (which is what the word Eucharist means), offer it to God, break it into pieces and then share it. Here Jesus is presented as the one providing the bread, but elsewhere in the gospel we are told that *Jesus is actually the bread himself*, and that's what why we say we're eating the body of Christ when we eat the bread of the eucharist. Elsewhere Jesus describes himself as the bread of life. That's helpful if we missed the clues in the birth story of Luke's gospel, where Jesus is born in Bethlehem, which means *House of Bread*, and in case you missed the significance of that, later in the birth story, three times you're told he's placed in a manger, which is a food trough. Here, in the story of the feeding of the five thousand is what that was all about: Jesus is the spiritual food of the world. Through him, our souls are nourished, through him, God feeds us, so that we will become what God made us to be, which is people who will embody and live out God's dream for a world shaped by love.

So how does Jesus feed our souls? By giving himself. He doesn't just give us ideas or wisdom, he gives his entire self, body and spirit. That's why we 'eat his body' and 'drink his blood' – we take his life into ourselves in sharing the bread and wine. Jesus gives himself to us so that we might become his body and carry on his mission of incarnating love. But he does so by allowing himself to be killed, for it is the only way for us to realise that we kill one another (symbolically and literally) but are set free from that and it's the only way we will realise that God is entirely free of violence and the desire to punish. It's the only way we will realise that God is not in rivalry with us, and that rather being displeased with us, God loves us and even delights in us.

This self-giving of Jesus leads us to seeing the truth about ourselves, which is that we are locked into rivalry with one another, so in order to feel good about ourselves we put others down, exclude them or even kill them. This is part of how we come to see ourselves and understand what is important in our lives: that we are not like those we consider unrighteous or deviant, we are not like those who are our enemies and the enemies of goodness and therefore the enemies of God. Jesus nourishes our souls by first of all dismantling this false picture of who we think we are, by helping us see how we have built our lives upon lies told to us and by what our society has told us matters, namely that we are somebody only if we achieve great things or have other's approval. Through his crucifixion, Jesus shows us what that ultimately leads to and so we begin to see the emptiness of that. Although at first this seems like a loss of what we considered important as giving substance to our lives, it actually clears the way for us to see the Promised Land is not something we achieve by our efforts, but is where we already are, for God's love is already given to us, as we are, without any effort on our part.

Now as we face the uncertainties of life, we realise that we no longer need the mechanisms for coping that we have developed to ensure our safety and the safety of those we care about. We can begin to let go of them - those things which seemed to provide us with a degree of importance and meaning, and yet were only so because society said so. So much of that has been at other's expense, or even at our own. We have even been in rivalry with ourselves: trying to be what we 'should' be (which is what is respectable and acceptable) rather than what we really are or could be. Yet, as we're told, Jesus takes away the sin of the world, which in the context of what I'm talking about here, is the mechanisms for coping we develop which end up denying us life, rather than giving it to us. And so our sin, our coping mechanisms which deny rather than generate life, are what separate us from God, and yet become now the very thing which unite us to God.

French mystic Simone Weil, noted how a prison wall kept prisoners apart and yet was also the means by which they communicated and so connected with each other, and so too with regard to what separates us from God – it becomes what joins us to God. Through Jesus then, those very aspects of our lives which separate us from God, become what allow us to join to God. And thus, we realise that, loved by God, we have and are all that we need. Through the food that is Jesus, who is divine love, flowing endlessly out of God without limit, we have more than we need. Like the baskets of bread remaining after the five thousand have eaten what they need, there is so much left over for us to love those we share the world with.