

John 6:1-21

Today our lectionary begins a several week foray into John 6, starting with the feeding of a large crowd and the subsequent “Bread of Life” dialogues that unfold over coming weeks. And if multiplication of the loaves and fishes was not enough there is a bit of water walking as well in today’s reading. Jesus multiplication of the bread and fishes to feed a hungry crowd is the only miracle to appear in all 4 gospels - in fact Mark has this story twice. John is the only one who adds the endearing detail that it was a little boy who provided his lunch. The Church obviously thought they were telling an important story in telling this one.

But today since we are looking at John’s version of the story we had best start by not using the term, “miracle” which I just used.

Jesus was highly suspicious, and I imagine remains so, of any faith built upon stunts, gimmicks and raw power to bend or shatter the laws of nature. In the thinking of the gospel of John it is as if a person invariably will be seduced by the exercise of such power by seeking to harness or manipulate it. (Just as an aside the tawdry story of David ... well seducing is a far too benign word, I think raping Bathsheba probably captures it... he is the King after all... is a splendid example of power corrupting a person).

Reflecting this mindset, in John’s gospel Jesus chastises the adoring crowd who have followed the breadcrumb trail to him and would make him king put him upon the throne. “You seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.”

In John’s gospel we are not to think of Jesus mighty acts as miracles but as signs. Signs do not point to themselves in a circular self referencing fashion but point to the reality that is greater and beyond the physical signs that Jesus speaks of.

One of features of the earliest Christians was they gathered together to eat meals. Not just liturgical meals with a thimble of grape juice and a small crustless cube of white bread but fair dinkum real meals. While serving as the necessary feeding of the physical body these meals are also signs erected upon the face of the earth that God provides, of the nurture of the community, of a taste of the heavenly banquet at the end of the age. Today we have food and a hungry crowd. The disciples are aware there is a problem. Too many people, not enough food, not enough money to buy food. We don’t have to completely spiritualise all this talk in the gospels about food and the many meals Jesus eats with people. Yes John’s gospel does want us to see further, go deeper, but physical bread and its provision is something the church values in its own right. Food, welcome, hospitality is a sacred and holy things

There was a consultation with participants, staff and volunteers during the week. And one of the values that was most cherished about CAN Community Support was hospitality. And the example that was referred to frequently was the Wednesday community meal where anyone is welcome, no questions asked, no judgments made. People sitting down together eating a meal. In that simple act is something sacred or holy if you like. We had a new group of volunteers cooking on Wednesday. A beautiful Japanese meal. We had a new group of volunteers from Hillsong church - city campus, they call it.

Don't just see the physical bread, but in the wonder of hungry people having food come to see the Bread of Life who feeds our impoverished spirits.

Augustine - In his Confessions, made the statement, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

Whenever we have a new person turn up to worship, or if I have a conversation with someone about faith, at the back of my mind is the question what are you seeking, what hunger has brought you here today, where in your life are you unsatisfied or restless? Now of course it is seldom the most pastoral strategy to immediately raise or confront the person with those questions directly. Most often these sorts of things emerge more slowly as the relationship grows and the person feels more comfortable in letting down their guard and allowing you into some of the most personal and vulnerable parts of their life. But inevitably there is a hunger, a feeling of dissatisfaction, a desire for connection and identity, a nagging pain that cannot be covered over that brings a person to worship, to seek out pastoral support. It is not you nor me that can fill this hunger but we can point to the sign of the one who is the satisfier of all our longings.

Why so much? What is going on with the 12 baskets of leftovers? No mention of them going to the poor; those who just ate were the poor. We might think a better sign/miracle would be for Jesus to have produced just enough – but he overdid it... Was it wasted? So much in the spiritual life is a waste, while we in Western society live in a scarcity mindset.

Most of what happens in our society is predicated upon two principles - self interest - people will act in their own interests (was it Paul Keating who said, Always back the horse of self interest; at least you know it will be trying) and scarcity; there are not enough goods to go around. We are all in competition with each other for scarce resources. So given those two principles we just have to find a way to shape a system where these principles work for the greater, or at least greatest good. And we call it Capitalism.

God's abundance. Jesus demonstrates Abundance thinking in the face of a crowd trapped in Scarcity thinking.

A few weeks ago at our Ageing and our Faith series Pam brought to the group an autumn leaf she had found in the street. I caught her attention and indeed it was an exquisite object. She passed it around and we all were captivated by the intricate patterning on the leaf, the interplay of the vibrant reds, mellow gold and yellows, the delicate mauves and crimsons, all in a gorgeous pattern. But me, finding it hard to simply just enjoy this eruption of colour and cosmic ingenuity, had to begin thinking, But what if Pam had not found and brought it into our group? What if not only Pam did not spy it but no-one saw it and it lay out in the street, to be swept into the gutter and down the drain. What about not just one leaf, but all the countless millions upon millions upon millions of colours erupting upon leaves throughout the world that flutter to the floor of forests unspotted by any eyes, or at least any conscious human eyes. What is the use? I think it was Elvis Costello who had the phrase, “all this useless beauty”.

We do the small things that are in front of us.

And it struck me once again how important that is. “Do the little things”.

Jesus tells his disciples to ask everyone to sit down. He then takes the loaves, and the fishes, gives thanks, and he starts to hand them out. From that small step, from that tiny start He then feeds the 5000. He didn't just feed them – first He gave thanks – he prayed – and then He fed them in abundance. He fed them until they were satisfied. In fact so much that there were left overs – 12 baskets!

In this miracle Jesus has offered us a pattern of how we may approach those things that are too much, too big, too difficult.

We start with the most important. We give thanks, we pray. We do that each and every week we meet – we pray for the world, for its needs, for His church, we pray for each other and for those in need. We give thanks.

And we may just find there is more going on, more available, more put into play than the little we brought to the table. It is as if Jesus sees what we have and says, Yeah, not much! But yeah, I can work with that.

We may even end up being the little boy!

