

2nd August 2020
St. John's Carrington
Trinity 8: Isaiah 55.1-5, Matthew 14.13-21

DO you remember a few weeks ago when lockdown started to ease, and all this footage came out of people queuing up to get into McDonalds again?

I've not been to a McDonalds since 2003, but let me tell you, I can still taste of a Big Mac, the sweetness of the BBQ sauce and the delicious saltiness of their fries.

The problem with a Maccy D's though, like a lot of fast food, is you enjoy it, it briefly fills you, but then a few hours later you're hungry.

It doesn't fill that deep hunger that a full and nutritious meal will fill.

I wonder why I thought of that when I was reading this passage from Isaiah.

Isn't it just the most beautiful portrayal of what it means to be a disciple?

A priest friend of mine once described it as 'the most beautiful passage in the whole of scripture.'

He's not wrong is he?

Look at it again: look at the richness of the language, the beauty of its construction,
the image of a God in whom abundance of life is found.

It's a passage of pure invitation: the word 'come' is used four times – it shows a God who is hankering after his people, thirsting after relationship with them.

It's a passage that speaks of spiritual hunger – of that gnawing feeling in our hearts that we try to fill with all sorts of things: food, gadgets, holidays, self-sufficiency, drugs, alcohol, success.

Like the Big Mac, we may satisfy that gnawing and clawing feeling for a while,

But before we know it, it's back.

The passage from Isaiah is the ultimate rebuttal of that: the end of that spiritual hunger, of that knot in our guts, that whether we realise it or not, is our desire to be in relationship with God.

Of course, we need to set the passage in its appropriate context.

It is in the second part of Isaiah's prophecy, what is often called the book of consolation.

It is written to convey hope to the Israelites in the midst of their exile in Babylon.

To a people who feel hopeless, God is speaking hope,

To those who feel abandoned, God is saying 'I am with you.'

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And God is saying to them that he is the one who will bring satiate their pain and their grief, so why look anywhere else?

In their exile, the Israelites are, understandably, seeking succour from other places, but none of that satisfies, none of that will bring restoration.

In our own lives, we seek salvation from places other than God,

Don't get me wrong – things we like are good for us,

The problem is when they became the things that dominate our thoughts and our lives.

It is only God that will fill that deep down, existential yearning.

We were made for Him and as St. Augustine says, our hearts our restless til they find their home in Him.

And it is freely offered. There is no need to save or to store up, it comes out of God's own storehouses to use Isaiah's language.

All God wishes from us is for us to come to him and accept his invitation,

Not out of fear of judgement or damnation,

God is not standing there with a riding crop saying 'love me.'

He's inviting us because he longs for us, and he knows that only he can satiate,

Only he can provide the drink that quenches the deepest of thirsts.

And that which God offers, he offers in abundance –

the image of wine and milk, rich, exotic things are a perfect illustration for the sheer wellspring of love and life that God brings.

It is an image that is prevalent in scripture where the 'end times' – or the coming of God's Kingdom, the restoration of Israel – are portrayed as a feast or a banquet overflowing with abundance.

This is a promise that Jesus fulfils and realises in the feeding of the 5000:

He is God incarnate, he is the anointed one, he is the Messiah who brings that overflowing of abundance.

But, and there is a but:

In many churches the sermon would end there.

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Jesus brings abundant life, so turn to him and all will be well.

Let's grab the elephant in the room by his ears shall we?

We know that whilst Jesus is the answer to the spiritual void, there are still too many who will go to bed with a physical and tangible hunger.

An ache in their bellies and sorrow in their heart as the bank balance once again means parents will sacrifice their last meal for the sake of their children.

In fact, even for those of us with a spiritual hunger may be left baffled why, even after praying and reading scripture, we still find ourselves yearning, we still find ourselves trying to fill that gap with other things, with the 'bread that does not satisfy.'

The truth is: the abundance that Jesus offers and invites us to share is not a sudden moment of joy that will make us all feel happy,

It is not an instantaneous thing: it is the lifelong transformation that comes from a life lived in worship and service of God.

Israel did not suddenly find the exile over, but the prophecy of Isaiah was a promise that God, even in their wilderness, was there and that he was with them.

It is a prophecy that speaks to the certainty that in the wilderness of fresh lockdowns, God is with us.

And, as I've spoken about many times, it is the promise of that future of abundance breaking into the world now.

There is a very subtle moment in the feeding of the 5000 that is often overlooked:

In verse 19, look what Jesus does: he blessed and broke the loaves but he gives them to the disciples to distribute.

The Gospel of abundance, of plenty, has been given to us to share and to distribute.

And wherever the hungry are, the Gospel has to be.

As a world, we have within our power the capacity to feed.

There is no excuse for any man, woman or child to go to bed hungry this night,

As Christians, we are compelled to speak,

Christ tells us to share his bread, to share his wine.

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As Pope Francis once said: 'you pray for the hungry, then you go and feed them.'

How can we who have tasted the sweetness of the nectar,

And the richness of the bread not share the abundance that God has given us?

And maybe in sharing the real bread, we draw closer to the one who break the bread of his body for us all?

Maybe that was the unexpected miracle: that the disciples realised the Kingdom had come and it was given to them to distribute.

Maybe the miracle of today is re-discovering Christ who is already at work in the world.