

I want to speak to you this morning about our passage from Matthew about the feeding of the 5000. It is always important to keep in mind when thinking of any passage in Matthew, that Matthew directs his Gospel to a principally Jewish audience of followers of Jesus. Matthew was writing in the 80's of the Common Era some 50 years after the crucifixion and resurrection. This was a time when tensions were high. Jewish rebellion against the Roman Empire had begun in 66. The first wave of rebellion resulted in the complete ruin of Jerusalem including the complete destruction of the Temple and the execution of the entire priestly class. The rebellions continued intermittently for some 70 years until 136 when the Emperor Hadrian defeated the Jews led by Simon Bar Kochba, which resulted in the final dispersal of the Jews out of Judea and the renaming by the Romans of Judea to Syria Palaestina.

In Matthew's time the Pharisees were highly engaged in trying to transform Judaism, a religion without its Temple and without its priests, into a synagogue-based religion capable of flourishing in the diaspora. Matthew's primary goal was to convince his Jewish audience, that Jesus was the Messiah to bolster those Jewish followers of Jesus known as Followers of the Way in their acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah, and to convince those Jews who rejected the idea. In Matthew's time there was increasing hostility from the Pharisees towards Jewish Followers of the Way. In the face of that hostility and

in the face of legions of Gentile converts to the Way, by early in the second century, the two became distinct and separate religions, Judaism and Christianity.

To understand our passage from Matthew, it is important to know its context and understand Matthew's eventually unrealized goal.

Critical to understanding the message in the Feeding of the 5000 is understanding that food security was a major issue in the first century Roman Empire especially in the occupied territories like Judea. Even before the beginning of rebellion, food was scarce among the people and malnutrition a major issue for most people. The Roman elites and those Jews, including the priestly class, who had made their accommodation with Rome enjoyed abundance. Just as in all the stories you have read or seen in the movies of the way collaborators in Nazi held countries did just fine initially, while the rest of the population had well below survival level access to the basics of life before and during the Second World War. The number of sick people who appear in the Gospels may be seen as a direct consequence of that malnutrition.

In turning the five loaves and the two fish into enough to feed the 5000 with 12 baskets of leftovers, the story reflects the Hebrew biblical tradition that God's will is that all people shall be fed. In Exodus 16 God provides mana from Heaven so that

the people in the wilderness were fed. In Ezekiel 34 God chastises Israel's false shepherds: *thus says the Lord God: Woe, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat; you clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatted calves, but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak; you have not healed the sick; you have not bound up the injured; you have not brought back the strays; you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.* In Isaiah 58 in verses 7 and 10: *Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them and not to hide yourself from your own kin? and if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.*

Two chapters before our reading, Matthew has Jesus defending his disciples before the Pharisees who were hungry and gathered grain to eat on the sabbath. *I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.*" Once again associating feeding the hungry with the Son of Man who is the Messiah.

And to conclude this point, back to Ezekiel, *The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase. They shall be secure on their soil, and they shall know that I am the Lord when I break the bars of their yoke and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them. They shall no more be plunder for the nations, nor shall the animals of the land devour them; they shall live in safety, and no one shall make them afraid. I will provide for them a splendid vegetation so that they shall no more be consumed with hunger in the land and no longer suffer the insults of the nations.*

These texts that I have quoted are just a few examples of many, many times in scripture that it is made clear that God desires that all shall be fed and that in the coming of the Messiah, God will break the empires that hoard the resources for their elites.

The feeding of the 5000 occurs in a remote place making the connection between Jesus' action in feeding the hungry to the feeding of the Children of Israel in the desert. The breaking of the five loaves is also a foretaste of the last supper and the eucharist. The fact that all were satisfied is a celebration of the abundance of God which exceeds the needs of all, if only that abundance can be shared justly.

The numbers 5 of the loaves and 2 of the fish and 12 of the leftovers mean more than just the paucity of supply and the abundance of result. 5 refers to the five books of the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – the spiritual nourishment of the Jewish people then and now. 2 refers to the foundations of their faith: the law and the prophets. In blessing the bread and the fish, Matthew has Jesus demonstrate he is the fulfillment of both the law and the prophets. The 12 baskets refer to both the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 disciples who are shortly to become the Apostles who will be supported by God and his Christ as they bring spiritual nourishment to all the world.

Those of you who hear me preach every Wednesday evening at Evening Prayer, know that I always emphasize the importance of the context in which a passage is placed. Immediately before our passage of feeding the 5000 in the wilderness with initially apparent trivial resources appears the account of King Herod's birthday party: *But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company, and she pleased Herod so much that he promised on oath to grant her whatever she might ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." The king was grieved, yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he commanded it to be given; he sent and had John beheaded in the prison. His head was*

brought on a platter and given to the girl, who brought it to her mother.

Out of Herod's regard for his oaths and shall we also say his ego, the voice who cried in the wilderness, *prepare ye the way of the Lord* was executed. Could the contrast between the corruption of power and empire with the simplicity with which Jesus shares God's abundance with the "little" people in the wilderness be any more stark.

It is equally important to note what follows our passage appointed by the lectionary. In the next chapter, Matthew tells of Jesus curing a Canaanite i.e. a Gentile woman. The woman cries out *Have mercy on me Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.* Jesus answers *I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.* The woman kneels before Jesus and says *Lord help me.* Jesus replies, *It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.* The woman replies, *yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.* Then Jesus answered her, *Woman great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish. And her daughter was healed instantly.*

Next Jesus moves further along the shore of the Sea of Galilee he heals great numbers of people. Then like the occasion when he was teaching to great crowds in the wilderness and caused the 5000 to be fed, he now causes 4000 to be fed.

What is the difference? He is now in the Decapolis, where like the Canaanite woman, the people are all Gentiles. Far from worrying about throwing the children's food to the dogs, he is feeding a Gentile multitude revealing that God's abundance is for all.

In this story, he feeds the 4000 with 7 loaves and a few small fish. After they have eaten, the leftovers are collected in 7 baskets. The difference in the numbers are significant – not for any reason of preference or privilege. The choice of 4000 represents the four points of the compass. Seven is the biblical language of completion and of perfection – a reflection that God's creation was accomplished in 7 days including the day of rest.

The message is clear God's abundance is sufficient to meet the needs of all the world, of every race, nationality, or religion. It is only when empire enters in and permits or even demands that God's abundance be allocated unjustly, privileging small elites and power structures, that real hunger happens. 5000 are fed on the Jewish side of the sea and 4000 are fed on the Gentile side and still whether it is 12 baskets or 7 baskets there is more for others to be fed.

In the tense, violent, highly divided world in which Matthew was writing, the two feedings of the multitudes are radical stories contrasting the everyday reality with what things could

be like in the Kingdom of God where to quote Psalm 107, *Let them give thanks to the Lord for his mercy and the wonders he does for his children. For he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.*

Matthew may not have been successful in his mission to convince the Synagogue that Jesus was, indeed, the Messiah, the Anointed One, but he successfully raises issues that are equally relevant to us today.

What does all this mean for us? One of the things I have noticed over the more than two years I have been writing a homily every week for Wednesday's Evening Prayer service, and on occasion another homily for a Sunday service, is how the passages appointed by the lectionary, when you really think about them, have such a sour currency to conditions today.

God's abundance has never been more unjustly distributed. 9.9 % of the world's population lives on less than \$3.00 per day, that is 808 million people. In Canada, 7.3% of people live below the poverty line, that is 3,023,445 individuals. 1.7% or 704,090 individuals are described by Statistics Canada as living in extreme poverty. Some of those people are here on this island.

By and large we no longer live in a world of empires of territory and occupation. We live under a more insidious phenomenon, the Empire of Money. The top 1% own between 43 and 47 percent of the world's wealth. The bottom 50% own less than 2% of the world's wealth. The top .1%, 60,000 people, own more than the bottom 50%, 2.8 billion adults and their families. This year the world saw its first trillionaire. A trillion is a million million – a million squared. The number is so staggering that Microsoft's Copilot on my Word program won't stop drawing my attention to the fact that I have repeated a word. It is even beyond the comprehension of AI to have a million million. We could not be further from the Kingdom of God.

One could imagine somewhere out beyond cosmos the Trinity shaking its sacred head at the misery, the injustice, and the unrighteousness that humanity has managed to create in a world of God's abundance. And that is not even to contemplate how the monstrous misuse of God's abundance is

threatening the very existence of humanity and all God's other creatures through climate change.

What can we do? We may be a long way from the 1%, but most of us are far from the bottom 50%. Saying there is nothing we can do is not an option. Our faith teaches us that despair is a sin. Despair is to lose confidence in the mercy of God. An old friend of mine, now no longer with us, once said, "I find the Holy Spirit does her best work when I bust my ass." What are we doing about it all? Can we not make a difference right here on the island? Can we and our sister churches not ensure no one goes hungry? The Food Bank does good work; can we find a way to ensure that it has the resources it needs to defeat hunger on Salt Spring? We will go to the polls locally soon; will we make sure we demand that candidates work to ensure minimum levels of food and shelter on this island? Can we not be even more demanding when we go to the polls provincially or nationally? Are we prepared to demand that taxes go up on those who have, including us, to support those who do not? Are we prepared to seriously ask ourselves what

will I do? What would Jesus say and do if he were to appear in our midst right now?

I leave you with a quote also from Matthew's Gospel:

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food et cetera And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.' I think you know what happened to those who did not give. Amen