

Sermon Ninth Sunday after Pentecost 29th July 2012

2 Kings 4: 42-44; Ps 145: 10-18; Eph 3:14-21; John 6: 1-21

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Gestures can say so much. One thing which immediately impressed me about this community when I first came here was how much touching goes on, how much shaking of hands, hugging and kissing when people meet, even when they met the day before. Perhaps it's the Italian strain in Fremantle culture, but it says a lot about people who like each other and like being together.

Today four gestures help us to answer the question which keeps coming before us this last month*: who then is this?* – this Jesus who stills storms, heals the sick and calls people into new ways of living and thinking. We find these four gestures in the readings, and they give us clues to help us understand who Jesus is, and who he is for us.

The first gesture comes at the beginning of the Gospel: Jesus saw a large crowd following him and we're told 'he went up a mountain and sat down.' Sitting, in our culture, is mostly about relaxation. We like to sink into a comfy chair, we like to lounge about; but being seated still has an echo of power and authority: we have chairs of committees, thrones for monarchs and bishops.

In the ancient world sitting was the position for making authoritative statements and for teaching. We might find that uncomfortable – it's not easy to project the voice when you're sitting, and how important that is – but that is clearly what Jesus is doing when he 'sits down', even though we're not told what it is that he says.

We have been following Mark's Gospel this month, as we have for most of this year. But today we have shifted into John's Gospel for the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. Mark has this feeding story too, but John first tells the story and then uses it to build a whole chapter of teaching which will unfold through August.

In some ways this chapter, chapter 6, has the same function in John's Gospel as the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew: a solid presentation of Jesus' teaching, near the beginning of the Gospel. And they both begin the same way: When Jesus saw the crowds he went up a mountain and sat down.

That mountain is a clue too. Every mountain in scripture reminds us of Mount Sinai, the place where the divine law is received by Moses, and then given to the people. In scripture, everyone who goes up a mountain and teaches is doing a Moses. So that's the first answer to the question: *who then is this?* Jesus is a prophet and lawgiver like Moses, sent by God to teach the people.

This teaching means more thangiving information, it means speaking of God in a way which reveals who God is, and so draws people into a new relationship with God. It means inaugurating a new covenant, creating a new community of those who hear and respond.

'The honouring of God is the beginning of wisdom': isn't that true? What wisdom do we need in our lives? Wisdom, not information. We are stuffed full with information and our imaginations are blitzed with bright images out of cheap movies and stupid adverts. We need food for the soul, insights that will help us to live.

If the church doesn't transmit that soul food people will search it out elsewhere, and rightly so. And wisdom needs to be more than words. We are told we will know the true prophet like Moses because his words will be like his actions: what he says will be what happens. And so St John asks us to listen to Jesus and find such wisdom, but to find it first, not in what he says but in what he does.

2

What he does is to hold a feast. So here's the second gesture: 'Make the people lie down'. Whereas Jesus sits, to teach, the people are invited, not to sit down as our translation says, but to lie down to eat. The word doesn't mean lie down and go to sleep, it means to 'recline', as you would at a banquet: that was the polite way to eat in high society. Whether Galilean peasants actually reclined at an impromptu meal like this out in the countryside seems unlikely, but he wants to say this wasn't a picnic or a snack, it was what we would call a proper sit-down meal – for him, a proper lie-down banquet. Perhaps we hear an echo also of Ps 23: 'You make me lie down in green pastures'.

Lying down there on the green grass, we're told, Jesus fed five thousand people (actually 500 *men*, with women and children too, evidently) with five loaves and two fish. How can that happen? It is a great wonder and the story is told in each of the gospels. In fact it's the only miracle story told in all four gospels, and Matthew and Mark tell it again in another version with 4000 people, so it appears six times in all. That's some indication of the importance they attached to it. But what happened? Did Jesus somehow takes these few loaves and multiply them into thousands?

Maybe, but that is not quite what the story says. And though it is told six times in the four gospels, it is not presented as a *miracle*. In the gospels when Jesus does a miracle people react to it as an extraordinary event: they are amazed, astonished, overcome with awe; they say 'we never saw anything like this' or 'a great prophet has arisen among us'.

But notice that though the gospel writers think this story is so extraordinary it needs to be told six times, no one *in* the story seems to be awaree that anything special has happened. No one in Matthew, or Mark, or Luke, even comments that something amazing has happened. The only version where there is a response is this one, in John, and they get it wrong. They want to

come and make Jesus king, so that he has to withdraw. That is the wrong answer, and it takes Jesus the rest of chapter 6 to point them to the right answer.

3

What did happen, then? Let's listen to what it says. One clue is that St John, telling this story of the great feeding, is thinking about the little story of Elisha, which the compliers of the Lectionary have helpfully placed alongside it today. We heard how Elisha took rather more bread (twenty loaves) and fed rather fewer people (a hundred). The numbers are still challenging, and the point is to illustrate a word of the Lord: 'They shall eat and have some left': and so they do, with Elisha and with Jesus.

We know St John is thinking of this particular story because when he describes the 'boy' who brings the loaves he uses the same word as is used to describe Elisha's servant; and in both stories it is specifically barley loaves, the common barley bread of the poor.

There is another factor. The Elisha story happens in the middle of a famine. When someone comes bringing bread to the prophet it is named as 'food from the first-fruits'. This is not just food he is carrying, it is a sacrifice offered to God, through the prophet. The farmer has grain, despite the famine, and his response is not to hoard it, or keep quiet about his singular good fortune, but to cut the first ears of barley, bake loaves, and present them publicly in a thank-offering to God.

Whatever Elisha does, there is already a miracle going on, first in the fields (God is giving food!) and hen in the hearts of those who recognize God as the Giver of all good things, and give thanks to God in this costly way.

So here is the *third gesture*: the Old Testament echo tells us that the boy with the barley loaves and two fish (like the farmer in the old story) is offering them to God, through Jesus. When you do that you lift them upwards, to God, figuratively or actually, and then hand them over to God's representative. Jesus confirms that by making the same gesture: taking them, giving thanks to God, and handing over to the disciples to distribute. Because of this gesture, both stories point through Elisha, through Jesus, to God as the giver of all bread and all life.

Something happens when people recognize God as the Giver, when we hand back to God in thanks symbols of the good things God has given. However you explain it, that's what these stories witness to. When we give thanks for what is, life becomes a feast. Another OT passage comes to mind. From Isaiah 25:

> 'On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
> a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines ... Then the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces … and they will say 'Lo, this is our God, we have waited for him … let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation'. [Is 25: 6-9]

The feast on the mountain of God points beyond itself to the reconciling of all things in heaven and earth. It is a feast especially for the needy…

Isn't that what we hope for, long for, each time we come together, gather at God's table, make our offering to God with lifted hands, and receive God's gifts with hands outstretched?

Isn't that exactly why we feed on small pieces of bread, a sip of wine? We share a feast which points beyond itself to the life which God desires to give us. Not distracted by the food itself, we sense the way God touches us in the deep places and calls us into a deeper relationship. Don't we long for others also to come, sensing their need of God, and be fed? Aren't we called to live every part of life as a gift offered to God so that others are called into that living friendship with God?

4

Jesus sits as teacher of wisdom from God; he causes us to lie down in green pastures and be fed; he offers on our behalf the gift of thanks to God. *Who then is Jesus?* the one whose life shows us that all this is what God desires for us.

But there is one final gesture, this time from the apostle Paul: 'I bow my knees before the Father'. Again not literally: he was writing a letter and it's difficult to write kneeling down. He is bowing the knees of his heart. Have you got knees in your heart? – perhaps we should. It is a sign of submission, thanks, orientation of his whole life.

In this letter to the Ephesians, he's exploring the mystery of God's salvation through Jesus (incarnate, crucified, risen) the one in whom our peace is found, and it takes him to his knees. He reflects on that question *Who then is this?* through the many-sided mystery of God as Father, as Spirit and as Son:

> For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom all fatherhood in heaven and earth is named.
>
> I pray that according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit
>
> And that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

He bows first before God the Father from whom all fatherhood takes its name. It is more than 'family' life (as our translation has it); in a patriarchal society he sees God as *father*, begetter, source and originator of all life and being, all rule and all order. Whether as father or mother, or beyond all gender, that is what we also owe to God.

And God is known as the Spirit, the power of God strengthening our *inner being*, making us aware that we *have* an inner being, that that is who we are, beneath the outward show, and that God dwells in us and deals with us there.

And God is the Christ who dwells in our hearts through faith and who roots and grounds us in love, the love displayed in the healing mystery of the cross, the love which is beyond all knowing, with its breadth and length and height and depth.

Before all this, the Trinity of Father, Spirit and Son the apostle bows his knees in wonder and invites to do so too. We do that by making one more gesture, one increasingly uncommon in our days, the gesture of silence.

Nothing we can say gets anywhere near the wonder of the love of God revealed in Christ, of which the feeding of the 5000 is a great sign. We honour God most of all by saying and doing nothing: opening ourselves to God in silence.