

Abundance and Scarcity

Sermon preached by Rev Laurel Barr

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Matthew 14: 13-21

A few weeks ago I found myself helping my daughter with a school assignment about the growing food crisis in the world. I guess I knew in a vague kind of way about some of the issues but as we read the relevant articles it was there "in my face". We can talk about droughts and famines such as we see on an all too regular basis in Africa and here in Australia but for most of the poorest people in the world, scarcity is not about a shortage of food. It's actually about not having the ability to buy food that is already available.

This was the reason why desperately hungry people in the tiny nation of Haiti took to the streets in food riots in April of this year. Haiti is an example of one of the poorest nations of the world in which rising food prices mean that many of its people can no longer afford to buy staple foods like rice, corn and beans and cooking oil. In Haiti in which 80 percent of the population earn less than 2 US dollars a day and 50% of the population earn below 1 US dollar a day, most food is no longer grown in their country. It is now imported from the west as the nation tries to repay their debt. In a world of globalization and free trade, local farmers could not compete with cheaper imported foods but now food has become too expensive while the local industry has already collapsed.

I also learnt that while hunger stunts the lives of hundreds of millions of people too poor to make a demand on the market, between a third and a half of the world's grain goes to feed livestock. In the world over the past three decades meat consumption has doubled - but it is the better-off who are creating this demand. Most poor people cannot afford to buy and eat meat. *

In the sea where fish stocks are in serious decline, nearly a quarter of the total fish catch is thrown back dead or dying -and so you can go on. The data of food is not pretty. *

In the meantime we in the west face an epidemic of obesity.

Frances Moore-Lappe the author of "Diet for a Small Planet"* writes "Every species but ours has figured out how to feed itself and its offspring without destroying its life support. So what's up with us?"

Abundance and scarcity lie behind the story of Jesus feeding more than five thousand people.

First we encounter a tired and grieving Jesus needing time out in the wilderness after the cruel execution of his cousin John the Baptist by Herod the king - I don't know about you but I would understand if Jesus were to show a shortage of patience in these circumstances but what we see is Jesus moved with compassion for the crowds who flock around with their family and friends who are sick and afflicted with many troubles. They have come to him with their hope that he will do something for them.

Full of compassion, Jesus abandons his plans for rest and digs deep to find the strength to heal their sick. In fact Jesus is still ministering to them when evening comes. This is surely an abundance of spirit and love!

Yet we see God's abundance most clearly when Jesus asks his disciples 'to give the crowds something to eat themselves' rather than send them away to buy food for themselves. The disciples can only point to their scarcity: All they have is two fishes and five loaves. It was barely enough for themselves.

The disciples' attitude to the crowds smacks of the first instinctive responses of the characters in the story we shared with the children** when a stranger came asking if they could spare a little food for a hungry traveller. "I don't have any extra" one said while the others were very forthright "No!" and even "Go away!"

What happens next with Jesus is difficult to understand but all the Gospels record it and it meant much to the early Christian communities. For a start, it links Jesus to the abundant God of the Exodus story who fed the starving Israelites with manna from heaven in the wilderness after they had been freed from slavery in Egypt. It also links Jesus to God's prophet Elisha who fed a hundred other prophets with twenty small barley loaves with some left over. Finally it reminds them of how Jesus frequently talked about the kingdom of heaven as being like a lavish banquet in which there is food for everyone gathered from the ends of the earth.

Whatever actually happened in the wilderness that day, the profound point here is that in the abundance of God's provision the little food Jesus and the disciples have was sufficient for everyone there. When Jesus takes what his disciples have, gives thanks to God for it and blesses it and gives it back to the disciples to give to the crowd it is enough - not barely enough but more than enough. Everyone is filled and there are twelve baskets of leftovers.

Although Jesus and the disciples are tired and deprived of rest and have scarcely enough food for themselves, still with the blessing of God they have sufficient resources to match the needs of the people - and more. And so here in this Gospel story we see the extravagance and abundance and wonder of God's provision for the world that is more than enough.

As we gather today around this Communion Table of plenty today, we come face to face with God who is our most generous host and who longs to feed us and everyone with what we need - food for our bodies and food for our souls, healing for our sickness and hurts, forgiveness for our sins, comfort for our griefs, strength for our tiredness, new life for our dying, hope for our tomorrows. And always when we are satisfied we have something to share with others.

The Lord who looked upon that large crowd with compassion - the Lord who fed them is now the risen Lord of the church. And when we celebrate Holy Communion around his table this same Lord is here present in our community saying "Give them something to eat yourselves".

Frances Moore-Lappe also tells a story she has entitled *Hope's Edge**. In Brazil's fourth largest city, Belo Horizonte, the government declared food to be a right of citizenship. This led to a shift of thinking in that city as many people were inspired to seek innovative solutions to the problem of food and nutrition. Large patches of city-owned land were made available to local organic farmers as long as they kept prices within the reach of poor inner-city folk where there was a hunger crisis. A scheme was also put in place to keep the farmers and markets to their agreement.

The city redirected the thirteen cents federal government subsidy they received for children's lunches away from processed foods to local organic food. The effect was dramatic as the children's nutritional intake was enhanced.

Without going into detail, this new "food-as-a-right-of-citizenship perspective" changed the way people understood abundance. They found it in unexpected places. For example they found it in manioc leaves and eggshells that they had previously thrown out in the rubbish. Now it was processed as a nutritious additive for bread given to school kids.

The coordinator of this program was Adriana Aranha. Moore-Lappe asked her “When you began did you realise how much difference your efforts might make?” Her eyes welled up with tears as she said, “ **We have so much hunger in the world, but what is so upsetting, what I didn’t know when I started this, is it’s so easy to end it.**”

The Lord, who looked upon the crowds that day, says to us today “Give them something to eat yourselves.” The food that Jesus fed the crowds was real food for their bellies and food for their souls. Brendan Byrne*** an Australian Jesuit teacher reminds us that the story of Jesus feeding the crowd of five thousand with its strong connections to the sacrament of Holy Communion will never be complete “so long as people still go hungry in our world.” If we take the story of the feeding the five thousand with its abundance and the sacrament of Holy Communion with its overflowing grace seriously, then surely will there not be enough food and resources on the earth - indeed more than enough -for everyone?

When the stranger in our children’s story made his stone soup, each of the characters discovered that when they contributed with what they had even when it seemed meagre and not very much, something wonderful and profound happened. Not only did they have soup to drink but it was tasty and as they shared it they had become a community. Life was abundant and everyone was satisfied. So may it be for us and all God’s world.

Bibliography

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*** Tony Bonning, *Stone Soup*, Koala Book Company, 2001

****Brendan Byrne SJ, *Lifting the Burden*, St Pauls Publications, 2004, pp.119-9

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