



## Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church August 3, 2014

### Matthew 14: 13-21

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Today we have a well-known and well-loved story from Jesus ministry – the feeding of the thousands. It was obviously a well-known and well-loved story in the early church because it is the only miracle story that is in all the Gospels, in fact Matthew and Mark each record another feeding of thousands as well. Apart from the reality of hunger in the Roman world which would make any story of feeding popular, what is it about this story that so captivated the early church? Yes, it speaks of the miraculous power of God in Jesus, and yes it gives a clear indication of the leadership role of the apostles in the church – they receive from Jesus and pass it on to the community. But is that enough to warrant 6 accounts in the Gospels? Jesus turned the water into wine and there's only 1 account of that. He led the disciples to miraculous hauls of fish and there's only 2 accounts of that. What is so special about the feeding of the thousands? This story is special because it does more than tell of Jesus ministry; it connects back to God's involvement with the people of Israel and it looks forward to the great feast in the heavenly kingdom while it reminds us of the Eucharist, the central celebration of the community.

Matthew tells us that this feeding happened in a deserted place – a wilderness? Here is the clue that connects this to the Old Testament; remember that when the New Testament talks of scripture, it means the Old Testament. The readers of the gospel are being led to, or reminded of, the scriptural stories of the people of Israel. Here is the symbolic recollection of the feeding of the people of Israel as they wandered in the wilderness. Sure it aren't manna from heaven or quails in the story, but here was God, in Jesus, feeding the people, just as he fed the complaining Israelites. The story also recalls the widow's never empty jars of mead and oil that fed Elijah as he hid from Ahab. Even more directly it recalls the miraculous feeding of a hundred people by Elisha. A feeding with twenty loaves of barley that had leftovers. All these stories echo around the feeding of the thousands to make the point that this is part of the ongoing narrative of God and the people. A story that points to stories that all contain the same point – we are fed by God.

This feeding of the thousands also looks forward in time and brings to mind the great heavenly feast of the kingdom. A feast that was first mentioned by the prophets,

particularly Isaiah and the great gatherings on the mountain of the Lord, then highlighted by Jesus both in comment and in parables, particularly in Luke, and picked up in the great hymns in Revelation – “they will hunger and thirst no more”. This is the great image of the coming kingdom – a feast when our Lord, who was called a glutton and a drunkard, becomes the divine host and all those images and stories of the hospitality of God become real.

And of course, this is one of the stories that supported the Eucharist as the central sacrament of the new community of faith called Christians. Beyond looking to the past or pointing to the future, here was a story that underpinned the practices of the church in the present. The language of blessing by Jesus is almost the same as at the Last Supper and, more than the story of the Last Supper, here the small offerings are enough to feed all the people through faith in Jesus. Here is an image of table celebration that is open and welcoming and where the king is the host and the leaders feed the multitude. The original readers would not have missed the contrast to the feast in the story directly before this one. The account of Herod's feast, where the King and his guests dined and servants did the serving, while the messenger of God, John the Baptist, is silenced.

The feeding of the thousands is a story that struck so many chords with the early church. A story that reminded them of God's presence and blessing in the past, sustained them with the image of blessing in the present and looked forward to a glorious, hopeful future in the presence of God and the Risen Christ. A story that imaged and reflected the Almighty, Eternal God who is the same past present and future – a God of presence, compassion and blessing. A story that coincidentally is a great one to look at on a day of celebrating an anniversary; we live in the blessings of God based in the actions of God in the past and hope in the promises of God in the future. Indeed, the origins of the congregation that we celebrate today are part of the ongoing story of God past, present and future.

This is the very essence of our faith. It's not about what we do or believe we can do in imitation of Jesus. This is not a moral story about the following the example of Jesus and the disciples and sharing what we have with others. This isn't a story about Jesus embarrassing the crowds to bring out and share the food they were carrying. This is a story about the essence of our faith – reliance on the providence and blessing of God. A providence and blessing made real in the past and carried in story, made real in the present in the person and work of Jesus Christ and looked for in the future in hope that is grounded in the past and the present. And so we are called to always reflect on what God has done in the past, dream of what God can and will do in the future and be pointed to what God is doing to and with us here in the reality of the present.

When our forebears built this church they did so in the light of the stories of the building of the faith and churches in the past, in hope that the faith and church would be built in this new suburb in the years to come, while celebrating the blessing of God in the present by building substantial, relevant buildings for their worship and witness. And stories like this one from the Gospels would have sustained them. Stories that celebrated Jesus in Galilee performing acts of wonder and power while reflecting the stories of God's acts of wonder and power in the past and pointing to the yet to come acts of wonder and power in the future.

We worship and follow the God who was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Jesus and the disciples, the God of scripture and Gospel, the God of the Desert Hermits, the Reformation preachers and the Evangelical missionaries. The God who is the same compassionate, feeding and encouraging God yesterday, today and forever.