

‘Sharing the life of God’

A sermon preached by Canon Andrew Knowles at St George’s Church Kendal on Sunday 6 August 2017

Bible readings: Isaiah 55:1-5 and Matthew’s Gospel 14:13-21

From our gospel this morning: Matthew 14 verse 16:

Jesus said to them, ‘They need not go away; you give them something to eat.’

In case you’ve been on another planet for the past few months, the *Great British Bake Off* has been bought by Channel 4. Sue and Mel refused to go with Paul Hollywood (I couldn’t possibly comment) and Mary Berry, who exudes sanctity, has also kept faith with the BBC. Mary is going to front her own new programme, which is not at all like *Bake Off*, except that people will prepare food and Mary Berry will judge it.

It’s perfectly natural to have an interest in food. We need food to live and it’s said that ‘We are what we eat’. But we do seem slightly obsessed with watching food being prepared and eaten on television. The smacking of the lips and the low appreciative murmurs of the presenters are quite overpowering – and that’s just *Countryfile*.

There’s an equal and opposite obsession with *not* eating – slimming and keeping fit. I’ve sat through a few meals at which we’ve talked enthusiastically about dieting. And then there’s ‘junk food’, which isn’t particularly nourishing - it contains too many additives and the wrong sort of fats, but who cares? It’s quick and easy and addictively tasty.

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It’s people eating ‘junk food’ that concerns the prophet Isaiah – that concerns God, in fact, in our first reading. The Bible translation known as *The Message* renders Isaiah 55:2 as follows:

*Why do you spend your money on junk food,
your hard-earned cash on cotton candy? (‘candy floss’ in English)*

Food here is a metaphor for our relationship with God. Isaiah wants his people to choose what’s called nowadays ‘the healthy option’:

Listen carefully to me and eat what is good (55.2b)

Listen to me so that you may live (55:3)

I will make with you an everlasting covenant (55:3)

It's not about food – it's about *relationship* – our relationship with God.

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Isaiah Chapter 55 has been described as 'Isaiah's Gospel', or even 'The Fifth Gospel':

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
 come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
 come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without price.

Come to the waters

Come, buy and eat – without money

Come, buy wine and milk – without price!

Come – Come – Come!

Isaiah's passionate appeal is that people open their eyes to the richness of the gifts God is offering so freely and to grasp them in faith and repentance while there is still time.

For the thirsty, there's water and plenty of it. No charge.

No money? No problem. This feast is free and it's 'eat as much as you need'.

And there's generosity – not only water, but wine and milk.

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The words 'buy' and 'price' are repeated. There *is* a value on this 'free' food - a price *has been paid* – but not by the needy people who are invited to benefit*. It's free, because *it's already paid for*. In terms of Isaiah's prophecy, the one who has paid for these blessings is the figure called the Servant - sometimes 'the Suffering Servant'.

[*J A Motyer *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (IVP, 1993) p 453]

It's not about the food, remember – it's about restoring the people's relationship with God. Instead of punishment and exile, there is the possibility of repentance and a new start.

‘Surely he has borne our sorrows,’ says Isaiah of the Servant, ‘Upon him was the punishment that made us whole’ (Isaiah 53:5 KJV) - verses Christians see fulfilled in the suffering and death of Jesus.

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Water for refreshment.

Wine for joy.

Milk for richness and plenty.

All are invited – but individually: ‘You and you and you’. But the command to ‘Come’ is *plural* – ‘Everybody come!’ There is enough for all, but each must respond individually. This is echoed in John’s Gospel: ‘God loved the world so much’ – loved *everyone* so much – ‘that he gave his only Son; that *whosoever* believes’ (that’s any and every individual, without distinction or prejudice) ‘should not perish, but have eternal life’ [John 3:16 KJV].

It’s not about the food! It’s about the people Israel’s relationship with God; their covenant with God. God wants his people Israel to lead the world with faith, courage and attractiveness. The example he gives is the servant-kingship of David. Again, for Christians, the Servant and David are embodied and fulfilled in Jesus, the ‘Son of David’.

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In the Gospel reading from Matthew 14, this whole message about God is enacted – this time around Jesus.

We find Jesus seeking space to mourn the death of his cousin John the Baptist, who Herod has had beheaded. John and Jesus had together proclaimed the coming kingdom of God: if it’s ended badly for John, it may be even worse for Jesus. Jesus seeks to withdraw to a deserted place – across the Sea of Galilee, about 8 miles, away from the towns and the crowds. But the towns and the crowds have no difficulty guessing where he’s going and by the time he lands, they’re already waiting.

And the Gospel writer relates that Jesus has ‘compassion’ for them – one of the great words that describe God. Despite his grief and fatigue and longing for solitude, he cures their sick. ‘Come all you who are needy – thirsty, hungry, poor’. The Servant, the Messiah, one greater than David, is here: here is God at work.

Time passes and it’s nearly nightfall when the disciples draw Jesus’ attention to the need for the crowd to have food. And that’s when Jesus says to them: “They needn’t go away; *you*

give them something to eat". YOU be part of God's provision! From resources, however slender, blessed and broken and shared.

He has to be joking! But all four Gospels narrate this same event: from loaves and fish, a multitude is fed – men, women and children: not to establish a nation to lead the world, nor even an army to throw out the Romans, but to reveal the relationship God wants with people – and this time with *us*.

But it's not about the food. It's about the compassion of Jesus, which is the compassion of God. God is never too busy to attend to our needs: our anxieties, sicknesses and sorrows. We have only to turn to him – to hear again that 'Come!'

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God wants that covenant relationship *with us* – that one-anotherness whereby he blesses us and we bless him right back. That's what the 'elevation of the host' means to me – all of God and all of this world, Earth and Heaven, united as one.

And we are fed, so that we have fresh strength to share this 'good food' – this *relationship* - of God's compassion and love.

"They needn't go away," says Jesus, "*You* give them something to eat". We are the means, the agents, the ministers, by which the compassionate, generous God delivers his love to every part of this needy world.

[ENDS]