

Sermon for Proper 13A

The Text: Matthew 14:13-21

What do you have? Do you have a roof over your head, a bed to sleep in, clothes to wear and food to eat? Do you have a car or have access to some form of transportation? Do you have a bank account and does it have any money in it? What luxury items do you have and what other odds and ends are lying around your place? Could you pack all of your possessions into a suitcase or would you need a removalist van to make a shift?

In 1964 Donald Horne, a Sydney journalist, referred to Australia as the *'lucky country'*. This phrase stuck and has since been used to describe everything from our weather and wide-open spaces to our overall quality of life. Many don't realise Horne's quote has been taken out of context. He actually said: *'Australia is a lucky country, run by second-rate people who share its luck'*.

You may sometimes think the people running our country are still second rate, but most of us would agree that we are blessed to live here. Australia consistently ranks in the top countries in the world in terms of our quality of life. It has always been seen as a land of opportunity, a desirable destination for migrants and refugees alike who are seeking to start a new life.

But there are still the 'haves' and the 'have nots' in our society. The gap between the richest people in the land and the poorest is significant. Where do we see ourselves on the wealth spectrum? Is it easier for us to focus on what we have or on what we do not have?

Our Gospel reading deals with the very well-known incident in the life of Jesus where he miraculously fed a crowd of thousands. It features in all four Gospel accounts – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which is why it is very familiar to us.

Jesus had just heard news of the death of John the Baptist so he had withdrawn to a remote place to regroup and grieve. But the crowds came from the surrounding towns and followed him out there. Despite his grief, Jesus had compassion on them and still set about healing their sick. The day passed and evening came. Jesus had met their needs and it was time for the people to go home and get some dinner. But Jesus said they didn't have to go away and he instructed his disciples to feed them.

The disciples didn't have the resources to feed this large crowd – 5,000 men, with the women and children to be added to this number. In addition to this, it wasn't actually required. You could see this as an 'unnecessary miracle'. This wasn't a life or death situation of poverty-related hunger. The people could easily go and get their own food.

No one asked to be fed. No one expected to be fed. There was no need.

But Jesus insisted. He took the food they had – five loaves of bread and two fish – and miraculously turned it into a meal that fed all of the crowd of thousands. There were more leftovers than what they had to begin with. So what is the moral of the story?

Is it a call for us to meet the needs of our hungry world – ‘*you give them something to eat*’? When you think of what we do have here in Australia then it is easy to see this miracle as an encouragement to share what we have with those less fortunate than us.

It is easy to use this account to focus on what we have, to be reminded of how richly blessed we are in comparison to elsewhere in the world. The moral then becomes one of counting your blessings and sharing your blessings. No one is going to arc up about such a conclusion. It's only fair and reasonable to expect us to give from what we have, whatever that is.

Only...that's not our text! It is not how the story played out.

What did the disciples have? They had nothing really – only five loaves of bread and two fish. And in John's account we hear that even this meagre amount wasn't what *they* had at all. It belonged to a boy (John 6:8-9). This miracle is not about getting us to give from what we have. There is nothing especially miraculous about that. We do that all the time to varying degrees: depending on our generosity and on the perceived need.

Most of us are moved to give from what we have when we hear about an urgent need: a severe famine in Africa; a child requiring life-saving surgery; a natural disaster that devastates a community. We respond to these crises and so we should! But again that's not what our text is on about.

In the Old Testament book of 1 Kings (17:7f) we hear of how the prophet Elijah miraculously provided oil and flour for the widow at Zarephath [pronounced Zar-eh-fath]. On that occasion, the life of the widow and her son were at stake. With the feeding miracle in our Gospel account there was no such crisis; no life was at stake. There was nothing urgent or special about the situation.

As the disciples said: the crowd ‘*can go to the villages and buy themselves some food*’. It is because the miracle is so unnecessary that you start to wonder why Jesus did it and what is he trying to teach through it.

The natural order of things is that we take care of ourselves. We try and get ourselves to the point of self-sufficiency; to the point where we have enough. If we have more than enough for ourselves then we can share. But this mindset and natural order of things is such a limiting one really. It is limited not only by what we have but also by what we are willing to release, to let go of what we have. And we are notoriously bad at doing that.

This miraculous feeding occurred once the disciples realised what they didn't have; that they had nothing to offer. In Matthew's Gospel account, we see the greatest

miracles occur when people bring with them the least. It isn't what we have that makes us effective disciples in God's kingdom.

Earlier the religious leaders presented their credentials to John the Baptist by saying: '*we have Abraham as our father*' (Matthew 3:9). But John wasn't overly impressed with that, telling them that God could produce children from stones. It isn't about what we have but about what God can do with what we don't have.

We see this throughout Jesus' ministry. He was brought those who had diseases, those who had severe pain, those who had demon possession, those who had seizures, those who had blindness and those who had paralysis (Matthew 4:24; 15:30). It is not the greatest list of attributes to bring to the table; and yet Jesus healed them all.

For, what did Jesus have? In the world's terms he didn't seem to have much at all. He told his followers: "*Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head*" (Matthew 8:20). So he didn't have a roof over his head. And when he came to Jerusalem to claim his throne as king all he *had* was a borrowed donkey (Matthew 21:3).

But he did have authority: he had the authority to teach the truths of God's kingdom (Matthew 7:29) and he had the authority to forgive sins (Matthew 9:6). And in the lead up to this latest miracle we see that he had compassion on the large crowd that had come out to see him (Matthew 14:14). We have a God who loves us and cares for us. We have a God who wants to give us each day our daily bread. We have a God who wants to heal our hurts and bring us life and make us whole. It turns out that he doesn't need a whole lot or even anything from us in order to make these things happen.

So what do we need to have? We need to have '*ears that hear*' (Matt.13:43); that is, the ability to perceive that God's kingdom follows a different pattern to that of the world. And we need to have '*faith as small as a mustard seed*' (Matt.17:20). And God has provided even these to us because we don't have them naturally. For even when we have so little (or nothing at all) God can still move mountains. God can use us to feed the hungry and heal the broken through what he provides, rather than through what we have. God will see to it that his kingdom comes, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.