

## Sermon Archive 304

Sunday 2 August, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: Matthew 14: 13-21

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



It's quite a party! People mixing and mingling, nibbling on the canapés, little sandwiches of salmon and cream cheese with little frills of dill - and the champagne flutes - light sparkling in the bubbles. The jazz trio in the corner, adding smooth background to the laughing and chatting. The dresses are elegant, and the suits are sharp. Earlier there'd been dancing, really nicely done. The lighting's just right, mood nicely set. And the dinner that's about to be served! The table's practically groaning under the weight of all that's about to be eaten. Caviar and giant crabs. Roasted eggplant, and marinated stuffed peppers. Juicy meats from the grill, and spices from the East. And over there, just past the baskets of artisan bread loaves, on a shiny silver platter, the severed head of a prisoner. He was executed earlier in the evening, and his head has been placed there as a joke. His name had been John.

The rich and powerful hosts, in the company of their rich and powerful guests, are having a feast. Goodness knows what the ordinary people out there on the hillside, or by the lakesides, are going to eat. Not much, I suppose. But here, in this rich palace, feasting and killing are going together. That is the scene that comes immediately before Matthew's telling of the feeding of the five thousand. Talk about the starkness of contrast!

Exploring some of the contrasts our world provides, I submit for you a sermon about power, feasting, death - and the other meal being inaugurated, out there somewhere, as people gather and Jesus has compassion.

-ooOoo-

Not because it's current, but because it's still a staggering example, consider the wealth of Ferdinand Marcos, President of the Philippines for 20 years from 1965. You may remember him - the one married to the woman with a staggeringly large collection of shoes - who seemingly is on something of a political come-back, with her son Bongbong. Since President Marcos was on a relatively modest salary

(equivalent to about US\$13,000), with just a few allowances thrown in, no one could quite work out why he and his wife were able to live such an opulent lifestyle - hotels, apartment buildings, private aircraft, international travel, food and thousand dollar bottles of wine! Some corrupt people manage to amass significant wealth, but the Marcoses were in a league of their own. The Presidential Commission on Good Government, an investigatory watchdog body specially appointed, has to this day no accurate estimate of how much money was stolen from the people of the Philippines. They reckon it might be somewhere in the vicinity of ten billion dollars. While the money was flowing into the Marcos wallet, human rights were gushing down the drain. Amnesty International suggests that during the time of Marshall rule, 70,000 people were imprisoned, 35,000 people were tortured, over 3,000 people were killed. Additionally, there were 398 mysterious disappearances. On Radio New Zealand, after Kim Hill quotes Amelda Marcos saying "In my time as first lady, there were no beggars in the Philippines; it was a paradise", Lauren Greenfield, director of a recent documentary on the Marcoses, says "Really, their time exacerbated the poverty". Ten billion dollars stolen from the people! Wealth and death - how the world eats its feast. The severed head was on the table.

As I said, that's not current - it's almost ancient history. The current situation in the Philippines is that the President is only worth US\$28 million dollars, and this week announced that he was going to bring back the death penalty. In a former job, when he was Mayor of Davao City, he told a reporter that he didn't go to church anymore. "If I listened to the Ten Commandments or to the priests," he said, "I would not be able to do anything as a mayor." He also once described God as "stupid". Oddly, given that his country is full of devout people who don't think God is stupid, he seems very popular. They seem to think that he is strong and effective. Perhaps this is how the world eats its food.

I don't mean to pick on the Philippines. There are plenty of other presidents I could have mentioned: rich, angry, not really interested in sharing the bread. Coming to mind are two presidents, one dealing with the highest Covid death rates in the world, and another dealing with the second highest. The office is rich, and the people are dying. This is how the world eats its food.

This is meant to be a sermon of contrasts, so I'd better move on. Right next to the story of the opulent party of death, is the story of another kind of meal. In this meal, the people aren't stupid (as God is stupid). They know they don't

have much in the way of resources. It might be the case that it would be better not to trying feeding everyone - that's what they're thinking. But among them is a god-person who's suffering a severe case of compassion. He wants the people to be fed. So he does his god stuff - gets the people to settle, looks towards heaven, says a blessing, and gives them what the community has got. And strangely, it's enough. "Finest bread I will provide, till their hearts be satisfied". This is how God shares the food. This is how God does the table. This is contrast to the feast of violence and death. This meal is a sign that something else is in the process of being built - building the other feast.

Reflecting on his ten years as a New Zealand member of Parilament, Green MP, Gareth Hughes shared a few thoughts with Radio New Zealand's Phil Smith. Questioned on whether he had any unfinished business, this is what Gareth said:

*"We need to get rid of this thing called neo-liberalism. I'm 38, I've spent my whole life... in the shadow of those decisions that Roger Douglas and Ruth Richardson made. It was a system that was set up to value prices, markets, individualism. This flawed sort of psychology that we were all in competition with one another, when actually we know that we are a social animal. We are a constructive, positive, collaborative species. And we need a new system that actually does what Jeanette Fitzsimons had the courage to question, which is this growth for growth's sake. We should be asking "well, what growth, where and for who. How do we have a low carbon economy that doesn't trash the planet. We can't keep treating the planet the way we are, because, according to the experts, if everyone in the world consumed like we as New Zealanders do, we'd need seven planets to fulfill the resources and energy we'd need. If we're going to survive and thrive into the future, we're going to need a system change."*

There is one politician, then, who believes in a different way of setting the table and sharing the food. People as friends who share, rather than as competitors who withhold? What do you think his chances are of dismantling neo-liberalism? Not all that high, I wouldn't think - pie in the sky - pigs might fly - disciples tell Jesus he'd better turn the people away.

Meanwhile, here's another food story. Way back in 2014, while John Key was still in charge, an unremarkable clause was included in a quiet piece of

legislation. It went into the Food Act, and was described as a "good Samaritan clause". Its purpose was to protect, from civil or criminal liability any person or company donating food to a charity - providing the food was in a safe condition at the time of donation. Prior to this, no supermarket would ever had donated any technically expired food (best before dates) to a foodbank - it was just too legally risky to do so. That legal risk, led to vast amounts of perfectly good food being thrown away. It's estimated that New Zealand supermarkets were throwing away 60,500 tonnes of food each year - mainly vegetables and bread. Add to that the waste from private household, the throw away weight each year was 122,000 tonnes of food waste. All this while across New Zealand, 270,000 children arrived at school each morning without breakfast or went to bed at night without dinner.

The insertion of the good Samaritan clause gave the supermarkets confidence to donate food, giving the food recovery critical mass to make operating worthwhile. Big greedy businesses, like Foodstuffs and Progressive Enterprises learned to be generous, and the people ended up getting fed. There has been a huge turn-around in food waste figures. Did anyone see that coming? While the default setting well might be Marcos, Trump, Bolsonaro and Duterte, there is another way of setting the table, sharing the food. It's not to be dismissed as unworkable babbling of the dreamers and fools. In some instances, it actually works! Jesus shares his compassion, a clause gets inserted. The people eat.

-ooOoo-

I promised a sermon of contrasts - and I think that's what we've had. We gone from violence and greed, through to compassion and sharing. We've gone from severed heads to the filling of hunger. If more people get on board with a new way of hoping, sharing, giving, then the people might be fed.

He ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

Before we come to the table, we keep a moment of quiet.

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