

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 12 JULY 2015
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Amos 7: 10-17, Psalm 85, Mark 6: 14-44

“Powerful Parties”

The Kingdom of God comes close when a crowd of five thousand gathered on a hill is fed by a young boy sharing his lunch. The Kingdom of God is a long way off when the head of a prophet is served on a platter at the request of a young girl seeking to please her parents.

Generous hospitality on the one hand, murderous corruption on the other.

The story about Herod is one of three stories in the gospel of Mark where Jesus is absent. The other two are the end of the Golgotha story, when Jesus has died, and the story of the discovery of the empty tomb. And that is significant. Even in the way he structures his gospel, Mark distances what Jesus is and stands for from what happens at these three significant moments.

As much as Jesus is not in the empty tomb, or anywhere near it, as much as Jesus is well and truly dead after he has breathed his last at Golgotha, he does not even have the tiniest of associations with what goes on at the banquet in Herod's palace at the time of John the Baptist's death. Where death has its way, Jesus doesn't have a role to play or a word to say.

On the other hand, in the story of the feeding of the five thousand, which we find immediately after the story of the banquet at the palace where John the Baptist is killed, Jesus is present in every sentence. Here he is clearly the one in charge, the person that leads, directs, draws out and facilitates. He is the person at the centre, around whom everything and everyone else revolves.

Where Jesus is absent, the darkest and basest of human instincts take over. Where Jesus is present, even the smallest and most insignificant gesture of a boy who wouldn't have scored high on any scale of importance, becomes a deeply and profoundly meaningful and life-giving act. The generosity of a young boy, who has the courage to offer his lunch when a truckload of food is needed, feeds five thousand people.

But that's not all. Those of us who know the scriptures, and the tradition that this boy, the gospel and Jesus are part of, will hear other layers of meaning resonate within. Other occasions where the people of God were fed with bread will come to mind. The story of God's people being fed manna in the desert, for instance, or the story of King David entering the temple, desperate for sustenance while on the run from the King who was bent on murdering him. In a more metaphorical sense, those versed in the scriptures will hear the number five and connect it to the five books of the law as the staple food for God's people. The Christians amongst them will make the connection with the symbol of the fish, referring to Jesus Christus Uios Theo Soter – IXTUS – Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour. A symbol used in Early Christianity to help people find the way to safe havens in the catacombs of Rome when persecuted, and as a circumspect way of separating foe from friend in conversation when murderous kings like Herod were out to get them.

What the boy offers becomes, in the hands of Jesus, a banquet with plenty of food for all; in a material sense, as well as in a spiritual sense. On the Galilean hills, where Jesus is present, people find themselves close to the Kingdom, with an abundance of bread, with plenty of fish to feed everybody, and with plenty to spare. But it is not by bread alone that the Kingdom takes shape; it is the law, served with a double dollop of Jesus Christ that brings God's heaven to earth.

It doesn't say how many guests Herod is entertaining, but I think we can assume his banquet was a lavish affair. With plenty of guests, plenty of bread and plenty of fish. With the left overs handed out to the less fortunate after the meal and the poor hanging around the kitchen back entrance, as was the custom in those days for any king that mattered.

There is no law, however, and most certainly no trace of Jesus' way of doing things in sight. Power and corruption determine the agenda here, the desire to please the powerful, and a total absence of respect for human life and the voice of one who finds the courage to speak God's truth to power. In a complex political game of blame changing, Herod gets what he wants (a dead John the Baptist no longer able to bother his conscience) through the machinations of a spouse who understands how to manipulate their daughter into a position where she will ask for murder without committing it. Nobody's fault. Herod has the Baptist killed because he can't refuse his daughter, Herodias can't be held responsible because she was told by her mother. Her mother can't help it because she just tries to make her husband's life a bit easier.

That's what happens when the law is absent and the way of Jesus is nowhere in sight. That's what people do when there is no law to guide them and no Christ they follow.

Two contrasting ways of doing things, two contrasting ways of life, two contrasting ways of power being put to use – Herod's way and Jesus' way.

Jesus' way survives to the present day. And, unfortunately, so does Herod's. Prophets, those who dare speak truth to power, are still being silenced and killed, the innocent still being caught in the machinations of power politics and the blame changing games of the powerful. Herod, Herodias and Salome are alive and well.

It has never been any different, and it will probably never change. Amos, in his day, was told by the priest Amaziah to shut up and move away when his message didn't suit King Jeroboam's view of the world and sense of self-importance. Go, preach somewhere else, he says, we don't want you here.

It is what happened then and what happens now. The law and the gospel can be difficult to stomach when the party you're organising doesn't have generosity, hospitality, compassion, love, justice and faith in God's goodness and providing written into the script. When the Kingdom you seek to run leaves God-given directions for the life and well-being of all people out of the equation.

On the other hand, as in the other scenario we have been presented with this morning, when generosity, hospitality, compassion, love, justice and faith in God's goodness and providing are written into the script, a whole different picture emerges. A whole different way of doing things reveals itself.

There is abundance, there is community, there is sharing and there is charity. There is openness, there is vulnerability, and there is trust.

Which model, I wonder, informs our politics and politicians? From what template is Australia, and most of the world for that matter, run at the moment? Is it the model where even the smallest gift is taken and given a chance to multiply and feed thousands? Or is it a model where everyone is encouraged to look after themselves first, please whoever can help them advance second, and look at feeding the rest of the world last? How much of the script of Jesus' way, the script of God's Kingdom, written into policies, structures and processes? What are the values that are at the heart of wherever it is that power resides in our world? What are the priorities that drive our choices?

Which model informs what we do as a Church at the moment? Do we all agree that gathering on a hill with nothing but a packed lunch to share is a bit naive in our present situation? That shutting people up who speak truths we don't want to hear is permissible when it is "for the good of the Church"? That we need to hold on to what we've got, safeguard and safe-keep in a physical, as well as in a more metaphorical sense,

because we don't know what tomorrow will bring? Hearing what I hear at Bethel and around the synod sometimes makes me wonder.

It can be pretty unpleasant when what the gospel presents us with turns against our own interests, challenges our values, exposes our fears, and our lack of true commitment to Kingdom living and Kingdom values.

Stories like we heard this morning, about King Herod, and King Jeroboam, are there to remind us what can happen when we shut the voice of the prophets down.

The stories about Herod and about the feeding of the 5000 are stories about us. They are about what takes precedence in our lives. They are about which party we choose as the template for our way of living.

Is it the way of Jesus? Where physical and spiritual food, bread, fish, the law and the gospel are shared indiscriminately and generously? Or is it the way of Herod where there may be an abundance of physical riches of sorts, but Jesus nor the law are in evidence anywhere?

When it is to be the way of Jesus, and I don't think you would be attending Church this morning if you didn't at least want His way to be your way, it may be time to open your heart and mind to the mind-boggling reality of what that means. And tremble.

It calls you, it calls me, to give of what we have without fear of what tomorrow might bring. It calls you, it calls me, to a radical vulnerability that trusts Jesus to multiply the little we may have and offer it into something of profound significance and meaning. It calls you, it calls me, to risk not being welcome at the seat of power, of being shut up and shut down when we confront the powers of this world with a different scenario they could try.

The scenario of radical change, where justice flows like a river and all are fed and safe.

In the end, it is very simple:

In our world, more people go hungry than there are people who have enough. Until that changes, those who want to follow Jesus should be organising bread and fish parties, law and gospel parties, anywhere and everywhere. Sharing of what they have, trusting that it will be enough, if they are only prepared to let go and share.

Terrible violence rages in every corner of our world. Until that changes, those who follow Jesus are asked to speak to power and expose the systems that perpetuate that violence, even at the risk of finding themselves being served up on a platter or nailed to a cross.

Fear, hesitation and insecurity nibble at our resolve and commitment, our faith and focus, and draw us towards Herod's way of life. Feeding the world with bread, fish, law and gospel is a hard thing to do. It is easier and much more comfortable to give in and look after ourselves and our own interests first, to keep a foot in both camps, to skimp on generosity and hospitality, on charity and sharing, on care for others, and convince ourselves that the little we have to offer would not make a difference anyway.

But in the end, the choice the gospel presents us with is quite simple. Which party do you want to be at? Herod's? Or Jesus'? What is going to take priority in your life? The law with a double dollop of Christ's way of doing things, or the fear, paranoia and corruption of power that Herod stands for?

Are you prepared to offer what you have to give, trusting that it will be enough to change the world? Are you prepared to let Jesus take over and guide you? Even if it makes you vulnerable, physically, materially, as well as spiritually and emotionally?

Yesterday I came across a message on Facebook that said: Miracles start to happen when you give as much energy to your dreams as you do to your fears. And perhaps that sums it up in another way. Where Herod's way is driven by fear, Jesus' way is driven by the faith that dreams will come true if you're prepared to let go of your fears. Amen.