

## **NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH**

**SUNDAY 31 JULY 2011**

**Rev. Jacob de Ridder**

**Genesis 32: 22-31; Matthew 14:13-21**

### **“God’s Great Progressive Dinner”**

After years of hiding from his brother Esau, at last Jacob came to the point where inevitably he had to come face to face with him. And he was fearful. We can understand that, I guess. True, Jacob had come a long way since the days when he had left in a hurry in fear of his life at the hands of his brother, who had been rightfully furious.

But it was time at last to face the music; to confront the reality, and meet with his brother, come what may. That night, camped out in the open at the ford of the stream, he was fretful and anxious about what the next day would bring. Would Esau kill him? Or, by some miracle of grace, could there be reconciliation?

That night, he had a dream - a vision in which he struggled with a messenger of the Lord. They wrestled until Jacob was injured - and the angel gave him a blessing. And his name was changed from Jacob, meaning cheater, to Israel, which means God rules.

As he limped away, Jacob marveled: "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."

A reconciliation with Esau DID take place, and the future was suddenly very different. Jacob had faced the music, and the result was good and wholesome - just as he had hoped. He and his brother shared at the one table, and what a joyful meal it was! They knew the joy of new beginnings and of forgiveness.

At a country fair, a strong man was demonstrating his amazing strength. He took a lemon and squeezed it dry. Then he bellowed, "I have one hundred dollars for the person who can squeeze another drop of juice from this lemon." Several big, husky men tried, but in each case, without success. Then a small, slightly-built man asked if he could try. Ignoring sniggers from the watching crowd, he calmly grasped the spent lemon and, to the astonishment of everyone, squeezed one, TWO, THREE more drops from the lemon. "How extraordinary," said the strong man. "How did you do that?"

"It's quite easy after a while," said the little man modestly. "You see, I'm the local church treasurer." Which proves that miracles, especially miracles of love and sharing, do still happen. But they do not necessarily happen easily - or obviously!

Today's reading from Matthew's gospel is the only miracle of Jesus that is recorded in all four gospels. The story is perhaps the most well known of the nature miracles of Jesus.

Perhaps you can picture again the situation, and pretend that you are hearing it for the very, first time. Not long after the beheading of his cousin John the Baptist, Jesus retreated from the area of his childhood and Jerusalem, to the wider countryside, where he ministered to people in need.

On this day, Jesus, having withdrawn (as he thought) to privacy, instead found a large crowd there to hear him. And it is reported that he took pity on the people there, and healed their sick. That is just

in the nature of Jesus - even in his sadness and exhaustion he ministered to others.

But it was getting late in the day, and the disciples began to get anxious. These people are far from home without food. How are we going to feed them? they wondered. Should we send them away so they can find their own food?

And so they did the obvious thing - they turned to Jesus. The master will know what to do - he will undoubtedly send them away so that he and his disciples could get their needed privacy and rest.

But that wasn't what Jesus had in mind - for several reasons. First, he DID NOT want to just send the people away and wash his hands of the responsibility. He had compassion - we have already been told that - and in his compassion, he wanted them to be fed and not go away hungry.

But in addition, Jesus was dealing with his disciples, teaching them leadership. So when they suggested he should send the people home, Jesus turned the whole thing back to them. "No! I will not send them home - you yourselves feed them."

Talk about being put on the spot? How on earth were they going to do THAT? Today we know it would take a convoy, many large truckloads of food to get anywhere near feeding such a huge crowd - five thousand men, plus women and children!

Well, they scrounged together what they could find, which wasn't much. Five loaves of bread and two fish. Clearly nowhere near enough for them to feed even a small part of the crowd - it was just a drop in the ocean of need.

**BUT IT WAS ENOUGH FOR JESUS.** After prayer, he had the food distributed, and the leftovers collected. **LEFTOVERS???** Yes, twelve baskets full of them.

Now, as you are hearing this for the first time, I know it sounds a bit far-fetched. And I wouldn't want you to get hung up on the seeming impossibility of it. Because the miracles of Jesus always have an even deeper purpose. Or, in this instance, purposes!

The first is to show how Jesus does, indeed, feed his people. As we know, and reaffirm every time we celebrate the Eucharist, the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Bread is a very positive symbol in the Bible. It is such a recurrent theme that it is like a progressive, life-giving meal. It feeds the body, and represents the presence and providence of God.

A second deep purpose of this miracle is to teach US, Christ's people in the world in 2011, that miracles of love and sharing are still desperately needed today. And we KNOW they are - we see the crying need regularly on our TV screens. At this particular time it is a deadly drought and famine in the Horn of Africa. Difficult and tragic situations like this seem always to be with us. Can we find even more effective ways to respond? Would that take some kind of a miracle??

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life..." and I know he meant it SPIRITUALLY, but that does not let us off the hook when it comes to PHYSICALLY feeding the hungry! Jesus might say today that he is the RICE of life, the life-giving, life-restoring one.

We can be certain, however, that his compassion would be undiminished until no-one was dying of starvation! Jesus would not be satisfied until all can feed, and have sufficient, and more - until all the people can become a part of God's Great Progressive Dinner. Physically as well as Spiritually!

The feeding of the five thousand is a meal of special relationships. There is no mention in today's gospel reading of any Pharisees or others who would scoff at what Jesus did. The crowd was pure and simple - they had come to hear a great one speak, and to see this mighty one heal. That is what they expected, and that is what they found. But then there was something more, an unexpected bonus, a meal which no-one had been able to predict, and at which they all marveled.

As these people left that hillside at last, Jesus blessed and dismissed them, and they went to their homes, much changed. And I find it impossible to imagine that they didn't tell everyone they met about it.

The disciples, having been forced (with the help of Jesus) to deal compassionately with a seemingly impossible situation, went on following Jesus. For them, there was still more to come not least the last supper, when Jesus again shared bread, and linked it once and for all with his death and rising again.

And that is the link to us, the church of the C21st. Thanks be to God for empowering us to meet the challenges of today. Amen.