

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 18 SEPTEMBER 2011

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Exodus 16: 2-15; Psalm 105: 1-6, 37-45; Matthew 20: 1-16

“What is it?”

The Kingdom of heaven is like this:

Those who are last will be first, those who are first will be last.

Those who work a full day will be paid as much as those who only work for an hour.

Those who gather a lot will end up with the same amount as those who gathered up a little.

There is no point in gathering more than you need, because it won't keep, but when you need it more will be there.

Manna, the word means: "What is it?"

And it is a very suitable name, because indeed: What is it? That the Israelites find in the desert one morning to give them sustenance on their journey through the desert?

Looking at it from a purely scientific point of view: It is, or rather they are, small kernels of something that deposit on leaves that have been nibbled on by a certain species of plant lice, becoming rock hard and tasting of honey. Apparently it is still eaten by desert dwellers today.

But that is not what the story is about.

Learning to live with God, trusting his providence, obeying his rules, learning to accept not being completely in control when it comes to walking the way of God. Learning to expect sustenance even when it is not self evident it will be there when it is needed, learning to receive gratefully and to let go of the superfluous even if you might need it badly tomorrow.

That is what this story is about.

Manna is not desert life made easy, a free ride to the land of milk and honey on the other side. A milkman coming to the door every morning to deliver breakfast without asking for anything in return. On the contrary.

Manna in a way makes life even more difficult than it was. It turns the world upside down. There is plenty where there should have been hardship, there is food in the most barren place imaginable. But there are strings attached. It is a test they have to pass, a test of faith and trust and obedience God is asking from them. And in that sense the manna is as much a question as it is an answer to their prayers.

God provides the Israelites with food.

After going without food for a couple of days and starting to get desperately hungry, in the evening meat is provided by a swarm of quails that apparently have lost their way and find themselves in the desert, and being exhausted are an easy prey when they land close to the Israelite Camp. When they wake up in the morning the ground is covered with kernels of sweet tasting stuff that will become their staple food in the next forty years. That must have truly felt and looked like a miracle.

Intervention by a higher power. God feeding them and helping them even in the middle of the

desert.

They are only to gather 2 litres per person though. Not more nor less. And they are to keep nothing for the next day. And another funny thing: those who work hard and try to get themselves more end up with enough for the day as much as those who are a bit slower and do not manage to gather that much in the same amount of time. Apparently 2 litres is enough, for everyone, no excess, no shortages either. Some are cautious and who wouldn't be? A desert is a hard place to live in. They've started to starve once and probably this hadn't been a pleasant experience.

Better be careful, which is only human isn't it? You never know just how long this miracle will last. Even if the Lord himself is looking after you, you can still take up your own responsibility and make sure nothing bad happens when he forgets about it for a day or two, can't you? It's what we all do, isn't it? Make sure that we look after ourselves if nobody else does. Look ahead and plan, trying to forestall eventualities. So what is wrong with that? Nothing, but the ones who saved half of their portion of 2 litres for the next day find it crawling with worms when they wake up. This stuff apparently does not keep.

Stranger still: after a week of practice and getting used to the fact that it is there every morning, all of a sudden they are instructed to gather double this time. Because it is the Sabbath and there won't be any coming down on the day of the Lord. That again would be hard to believe for some. Why wouldn't it happen on the Sabbath all of a sudden if it has happened every day for a whole week? So obviously there would have been people that didn't gather double, and go hungry for a day.

Now, so far, it may not sound very difficult and you have probably heard the story so many times you don't realise what is actually being given and being asked of the Israelites here.

Imagine: Going to sleep every night without any breakfast for the next morning in the house, no nearby shops to pop in to, no possibility of getting anything anywhere when you wake up. Trusting that yes, the next morning it will be there for you, enough to feed the family that day. How would that make you feel?

Now imagine you have to do this every night and that you cannot take any precautionary measures. Go to sleep trusting that there will be enough to eat the next morning with your breakfast cabinet and fridge completely empty and no shops at hand.

Would you be able to do it? It might seem an easy way of living, but come to think of it, I don't think I could do it to be perfectly honest... I am just too used to be able to control my life. And so probably, were the Israelites. Egypt had been bad, but food had always been there in abundance. The larder full, the pantry well stocked.

But, just assuming you do get used to it, you had to get used to it because there were worms in your porridge every morning you had tried to keep something from the previous day. It gets worse. You discover that some days this breakfast will not be provided and that on every sixth day you have to gather double. Trusting that this time there will be no worms, the porridge lovely and as it should be. Making you realise that this food which has miraculously appeared in the desert is not to be taken for granted after all.

Just imagine what that would do to you.

Would it make you feel safe, looked after and grateful? Or would it make you feel very vulnerable, dependant and utterly out of control?

Manna, what is it? They are not completely sure. Is it a blessing, or is it a test that is hard to pass? Is it an answer to their prayers or is it God asking: Can you live with me, a God demanding an abandonment and trust that is quite hard to muster?

Some commentators say that the journey through the desert is for Israel a period of learning. Learning the ways of the Lord, learning to live the life he wants them to live, training to become people of God. And the manna is a training tool.

They are in training to become people that depend on God and follow His rules because they trust Him with their lives. They learn how, when they need Him, He is there, looking after them, even in the desert, when life is hard and it is difficult to survive. Kernels of honey appear, enough to survive, enough to come through their ordeals, but there is not a lot to spare. The margins of certainty are quite small.

However, it is not only abandonment with low levels of security that they learn about. They also come to learn about the economy of God. How the socio-economic rules that apply to the life of the community of God are very different to those that applied in Egypt or in any other place where God does not reign. Those who gather more have enough, but those who gather less also have enough. Those who are strong, working hard, putting a lot of energy in are not better off than those who are weak, do not manage to bring a lot together, don't have the energy to fight for their survival. The keeping of surplus, the organising of a nest egg completely useless, and nothing at all to be taken for granted. Life is only secure when paying close attention to the guiding Word of God and following that to the letter.

An insane economy that is completely at odds with the economic rules we live by day by day. An economy endorsed by the words of Jesus as we have read them in the gospel of Matthew. There is no performance related pay, there is not even time and effort related pay in the vineyard of the Lord. There is the same pay for everybody who has in some way or other contributed to the work in the vineyard.

Isn't that very unfair? Shouldn't the workers who started work in the morning get more than those who only worked for an hour right? Shouldn't they have received at least double the salary of the ones who came so much later?

Not in the Kingdom of God. God gives in equal measure, generously to whoever comes to work for Him. There is no distinction. Now that could fill us with gratitude for God's amazing grace: if we are late or slow or not very good at working in the vineyard we will earn as much as the others. On the other hand: why bother? Where is the challenge? If we get the same anyway...

There are several things to be said about that:

First:

Living with God and for his Kingdom is per definition at odds with living a life where achievement and the survival of the fittest determine what the rules are. The economies of the world we live in per definition are at odds with His rules.

Second:

Living with God and for his Kingdom is a choice for the absurd in the eyes of the world. As St. Paul says, insanity, and that it is.

Third:

Living with God is not easy, it takes a lot of hard work and personal growth to get anywhere near living what the Israelites trained for in the desert. They never really got to master it, steadily expecting the miraculous, receiving God's gifts but letting go of the surplus, trusting his generosity but never taking it for granted.

And last but not least:

Living with God is great. It is being privileged to live close to Him, to receive what we need when we need it, to be free of the worry of tomorrow because we know He will be there and pull us through.

Trusting that He gives in equal measure out of the generosity of His grace to those who are strong and those who are weak. That there is nothing to worry about when we stay near to Him, even in the middle of the desert when life gets really tough and we find ourselves on the very edge of existence.

Does it mean we have to stop living in the real world? Earning money, working hard, gathering together, securing our lives against hardship? And instead live like Israel in the Desert?

I don't think so. We are called to be the Lord's in the world we live in and struggle with all its inequality and strife. I do believe we are called to that with these stories in the back of our minds though. Let them put the struggles of life we engage with on a day to day basis into perspective, let them put the strife for more and better into perspective, let them make us think about social justice and equal pay in just a slightly different way. Helping us to make changes that will lead us on our journey to a Land where the Lord is King.

Amen.