

Meals as Enacted Hope Luke 9:7-20

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I was talking to a member of our church this week.

Her life is not going the way she had hoped.

She said to me, "No one imagines they will have to go through the kinds of problems that I am going through."

That's right, isn't it?

We all imagine that things will go OK for us.

Even though we see news reports

that tell us that disasters are happening to other people all over the place.

And we personally know many people

who have faced horrible things in their lives.

We still think it will all pan out for me.

Until it doesn't.

Staring reality in the face,

we need something to hope in.

And that's what Jesus provides for us in today's reading.

We've been looking at a series of meals that Jesus was at.

We started when Jesus was invited to the home of Levi the tax collector.

Last week, Jesus was invited to the home of Simon the Pharisee.

But it was actually Jesus welcoming the prostitute

who showered him with attention that created the drama in that meal.

This week is slightly different.

This time, Jesus is the host.

He is the one putting on the dinner party.

And those eating are his guests.

Today we are at the feeding of the 5000.

The feeding of the 5000 is one of the few stories that is contained in all four gospels.

So you have to make sure you are getting the particular emphasis of the gospel you are reading.

What is special in Luke about the feeding of the 5000?

The story starts with this somewhat random comment about what was going through Herod's mind.

It's sort of out of nowhere.

Herod hasn't featured in Luke's gospel up until now.

And he doesn't appear again until Jesus' trial just before the crucifixion.

So why this random popping into the story here?

Well it's not about Herod.

It's about the things he was wondering.

9:7 "Now Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was going on.

And he was perplexed because some were saying

that John had been raised from the dead,

others that Elijah had appeared,

and still others that one of the prophets of long ago had come back to life."

Those were the kinds of rumours that Herod was hearing about Jesus.

And think about it.

Those were not everyday kind of rumours.

Had John been raised from the dead?

Well clearly Jesus was not the resurrected John.

The fact that John baptised Jesus and they were both seen together is a pretty clear indication that Jesus was not the resurrected John.

OK so it's not true.

But is that a normal rumour?

Did people in the first century

routinely expect dead people to come back to life?

The answer is they did not.

We might patronisingly say that people back then were not educated and believed all kinds of stuff.

Actually some first century Jews (the Pharisees)

believed that there would be a resurrection at the end of the age

where all the dead would be raised and judged.
Other first century Jews (the Sadducees)
didn't believe in a resurrection at all.
But none of them believed
that dead people routinely came back to life before the end of the age.
And before you call them uneducated and credulous,
consider this.
All of them spoke two languages fluently.
Many of them spoke three.
So unless you can speak four languages fluently,
I wouldn't be calling them uneducated.
So this was completely out of the ordinary.
People were suggesting that Jesus was the resurrected John the Baptist
because they saw in Jesus
something completely outside of their experience.
Something that made them think that death could be defeated.

Some thought Jesus was John the Baptist resurrected.
Others thought he was Elijah resurrected.
Others thought he was one of the prophets of long ago.
What Luke wants us to do is to read the feeding of the 5000
with those thoughts in mind.
We'll start with the prophets of long ago.
Who was the greatest prophet of long ago?
It was Moses.
Moses who led the people out of slavery in Egypt.
Moses who was given the Law.
But most importantly for this story,
Moses who when the people were hungry,
asked God to provide food.
And God sent manna from heaven.
The people of God were fed.

God provided for all the needs of his people.
He provided when it seemed impossible.
And here's Jesus doing just that.
Jesus provides food for a crowd of people.
Food for people who are in a remote place where there is no food.
Sounds a bit like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness.
And plenty of food so that no one was hungry.
9:17 "They all ate and were satisfied."
Jesus is like Moses.
He provided food for God's hungry people.
He is like one of the prophets of long ago.

What about Elijah?

The people of Jesus' day considered that the ministry of Elisha was a continuation of the ministry of Elijah.

Elijah was taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire.

And Elisha was given his cloak as he ascended into heaven.

It was a passing of the baton.

Now in 2 Kings we read this story.

2 Kings 4:42-44 "A man came from Baal Shalisha bringing the man of God twenty loaves of barley bread baked from the first ripe grain, along with some heads of new grain.

"Give it to the people to eat," Elisha said.

"How can I set this before a hundred men?" his servant asked.

But Elisha answered, "Give it to the people to eat.

For this is what Yahweh says:

they will eat and have some left over."

Then he set it before them,

and they ate and had some left over,

according to the word of Yahweh."

So the people of Jesus day were wondering if he might be Elijah.

Well when you read the story of the feeding of the 5000,
you can tell why!

What else did the prophets of long ago say?

This is a prophecy of the prophet Isaiah.

It's a picture of heaven.

It's a picture of the future hope of God's people.

Is 25:6-8 "On this mountain Yahweh Almighty will prepare

a feast of rich food for all peoples,

a banquet of aged wine -

the best of meats and the finest of wines.

On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples,

the sheet that covers all nations;

he will swallow up death forever.

The Sovereign Lord will wipe away tears from all faces;

he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth.

Yahweh has spoken."

So there's a prophecy of the end, a picture of heaven.

And it has God preparing a feast for his people.

And Jesus fed 5000 from 5 loaves and 2 fish.

It's not unreasonable to see this miracle

not just as a miracle of provision,

you know, food for the hungry,

but as a sign pointing forward to heaven.

Jesus is saying in the feeding of the 5000,

"Hey look.

You will find the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy in me."

And what does Isaiah's prophecy say?

It says that death will be swallowed up.

So were the people of Jesus day unrealistic

in thinking he might be one of the prophets resurrected?

Not at all.

They knew that when the messiah came,
death would be swallowed up.
And here they see a man doing things
that look like Isaiah's picture of heaven.
They weren't gullible people
who believed in resurrections happening willy nilly.
They were people who believed God's promise about the future
and saw it happening before their eyes and ate the food themselves.

What does it mean for us?
We too should see in the feeding of the 5000
an invitation to dine with Jesus at the heavenly banquet.
I'm sorry you can't taste the loaves and fishes.
But I can give you a wafer and a sip of port later in the service.
Whether it's loaves and fishes or wafers and port,
it points forward to the same heavenly banquet.
It's a foretaste of a meal to come.
Jesus wouldn't have fed them
if he wasn't also going to feed us.

I mentioned a church member
who is finding life difficult at the start of the sermon.
The heavenly banquet is something we can look forward to
when life is tough.
Following Jesus is no get out of jail free card for trouble in this life.
In fact I can guarantee you that if you live long enough,
you will face trouble in this life.
Loved ones will get sick and die.
You will get old and things won't work
and it will frustrate you.
It can't be avoided.
But there is a glorious future.

That future is our hope.
It's a hope that keeps us from being knocked off course
by the rubbish that life throws at us.

Let's think some more about some of the details of Jesus' dinner party.

Who got an invite to Jesus' dinner party?

I'll tell you who didn't.

Herod didn't.

Herod was wondering who on earth Jesus was.

Jesus did a miracle to show the world who he was.

But unfortunately for Herod,

he wasn't there to witness it.

Who was?

The people who had followed Jesus out into the wilderness
to hear his teaching.

They are the ones who got a feed.

But more importantly,

they got to see Jesus showing

that he is the fulfilment of the hope of the heavenly banquet.

I guess you could say from that,

that the ones Jesus reveals himself to

are the ones who listen to his word.

Herod might have been curious.

But being curious is not good enough.

He didn't get off his backside and go and listen to Jesus.

And so he didn't see the sign.

Now you could say, it would have been hard for him to go.

He would have had to leave his palace

and rough it in the remote places with the crowds of ordinary people
who were following Jesus around and hanging on his every word.

But that's the point.

If you are going to get an invitation to the heavenly banquet,

at some point you have to acknowledge
that you are one of the ordinary people who needs to respond to Jesus.
Servants and palaces are actually a disadvantage.
They kid you that you are not the same as everyone else.
That you shouldn't have to hang out with the riff raff
to get an invitation to God's heavenly banquet.
But the only way to share in the feeding of the 5000
was to be one of the people who followed Jesus out into a remote place.
One of the crowd.
On an equal footing with 4999 others.
Worthy of sharing in the generous grace of God
because you want to listen to Jesus.

Here's another detail from the story.
How did Jesus respond when his disciples came to him and said,
"Send the crowd away
so they can go to the surrounding villages and countryside
and find food and lodging,
because we are in a remote place here."?
Did he say,
"Oh you of little faith,
don't you trust me to deal with the situation?"
No. He didn't say that.
Did he say,
"I've got this sorted guys.
Stand back and watch the power of God at work."?
No. He didn't say that.
He said, "You give them something to eat."
It's somewhat akin to taking me across to the Gaza strip and saying,
"Here's a problem, Tim, fix it."
Oh gosh, this is out of my pay grade.
But Jesus already knew what he was going to do.

Why did he tell his disciples to give them something to eat?

There are two parts to the answer to that question.

First.

God wants us to know that we have to rely on him not our own resources.

There's nothing quite like being told to feed 5000 men

in a lonely and solitary place

when you only have the contents of a child's lunch box

to teach you that you can't rely on your own resources.

Jesus wanted to focus his disciples' minds

on the fact that they were not to rely on themselves.

The same is true for his disciples today.

He wants us to know that whatever we are trying to do,

we will not serve him well if we try to achieve our goals with an,

"I'm going to do this.

I've got this covered" mindset.

Some Christian traditions really stress this kind of approach.

Ask Val Dunleavy some time

about how she and Joe got the money to go to Northern Ireland

to see Joe's family.

But even if you are not the sort of person

to book plane tickets to the other side of the world,

when you only have a 10% deposit,

you can still work on being utterly reliant on God.

If you pray,

"Lord, help me to rely on you and not on my own strength,"

I'm sure he will answer your prayer.

God wants us to know that we have to rely on him not our own resources.

That was the first point.

But God also takes what meagre resources we bring to the table

and uses them in providing his solution.

The disciples might have only had a child's lunch.
But Jesus didn't disdain what they had.
He could have waved a magic wand,
and made food appear out of thin air.
But he chose to break the loaves and fishes
and provide miraculously that way.
I think the message is
that whatever meagre offerings we bring to the table,
God will work with those to build his kingdom.
God can and does build his kingdom completely without human help.
When Muslim people get dreams of Jesus,
and convert to Christianity,
no human helped in that person coming to faith.
That has been happening.
But God's normal way is to take what we offer
and use it to build his kingdom.
You may not be able to do much.
Pray for a friend to come to know Jesus.
Lend a listening ear to someone who needs to be heard.
These don't feel like powerful actions.
But Jesus fed the crowd with five loaves and two fishes.

Last thing to notice from the story.
The left over baskets.
It's not hard to see that there's more left over than there is to start with.
Jesus gave his disciples an impossible task.
"You give them something to eat."
Not only was the task completed.
It was over completed.
God is not into efficiency.
Getting the job done with the minimum resources possible.
Why would you if you could create a universe out of nothing?

God is into extravagant over catering.

Imagine if you were making a universe because you wanted to make people to love and share your kingdom with.

Do you think it would be necessary to create 100 billion stars as well, just for fun?

It's not necessary.

God does it because he can.

He does it because he's a generous over caterer.

The message for us in the leftovers, is that if you have something on your heart that you would like to do for God, you shouldn't be quick to say that there aren't the resources to do it. God can over provide.

I need to stop.

But I'll give a quick summary.

Jesus is the new Elijah, the new Moses, the messiah who brings in the heavenly banquet.

It's in Jesus that we find our hope.

Life is tough.

But we are headed for a heavenly banquet.

The ones invited to the heavenly banquet are the ones who listen to Jesus teaching.

We can't make the heavenly banquet happen.

It requires God to make it happen.

But he will graciously use what we provide.

In fact more than use it,

he will transform it wonderfully in his service.