

The Miracle of Gratitude

25 July 2021

St Peter's 8 and 9:30am

Reading: John 6:1-13

Estimates vary as to the size of the crowd. Most think it was about 5,000. That morning we had crossed over to the other side on the Interislander. It was a smooth sailing and a beautiful day. From the length and breadth of NZ people were “walking for change.” It was September 1998. The Anglican Church had organised a ‘Hikoi of Hope’. I’m sure many of you took part in it. It was to highlight the need for action on poverty. During the march on Parliament, I had started to get hungry. It had been a long time since breakfast. Where, in this vast crowd of people, was I going to get something to eat? Then I heard a voice at my elbow. It was a young boy. “Hey mister,” he said, “are you on the hikoi?” “Yes,” was my answer because I was! “Have some lunch,” he said and handed me two marmite sandwiches and a can of Sprite and then disappeared into the crowd. The lemonade was even chilled. To this day I don’t know who he was, or why he had singled me out. But I was grateful. Not just for the food, but also for the miracle of kindness. The kindness of a random stranger who cared enough to share his lunch. Miracles happen when we share what we have.

I’m in good company having a random stranger offer a drink in a large crowd. Pope Francis was cruising in his popemobile when a woman from his home country of Argentina called out to him. “Papa, I have a drink for you.” She offered him a drink, I think Argentinian beer, so he reached down and took a large draft. Later the security leader took him aside, “Your holiness you really shouldn't take drinks from strangers. It could have been poison.” “Don’t worry,” said the Pope, “she wasn’t one of the cardinals.”

Who would have guessed that a boy’s lunch, (not two marmite sandwiches and a can of Sprite, but five loaves and two fish) would have fed the crowd of 5,000 following Jesus that day. This story was very important to the early Christians because it's in each of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and

John. Today we listened to John's version. It was a defining story for the early Christians as it has so much to teach.

For me the central message is that what we have been given is enough. A handful of loaves and fish can feed everyone with heaps left over.

This goes against what we are taught. We live in a society of perpetual dissatisfaction. Advertisers spend millions every day to convince us that what we have is not enough. That what we have is not good enough. Billionaire John D. Rockefeller was asked how much money it would take to make him happy, "Just a little bit more," he answered. "When will you have enough?" He said, "When I have a little more." Thinking this way soon starts to have a profound effect on our souls. If what we have isn't enough, maybe we are not enough. We quickly get to a point where we have this constant feeling of dissatisfaction. (Sometimes we see this at play when we watch our kids. It used to take so little to keep us happy when we were their age, and they seem to never be satisfied.) Pretty soon every aspect of modern life takes on a kind of super critical aspect. If only the government did this. If only the church did that. The worst dissatisfaction of all is only just around the corner. If I don't have enough, if I'm not good enough, then my faith is no longer enough, God is not enough. When God is not enough to whom can we run?

But there's a way out of this dissatisfaction spiral. Jesus gives us the way out. We have heard it so often we might miss it. In verse 11 we read that Jesus took the loaves and gave thanks. There it is. Jesus gave thanks. The next line is very telling. Then they were satisfied. In the giving of thanks, we find the antidote to the poison of dissatisfaction. Gratitude is the answer we are looking for.

Gratitude sets us free. It sets us free on a path to satisfaction. When we are grateful for what we have then we have enough. When we are grateful for life then we are good enough. When we are grateful for our faith then we are content. When we are grateful for God in our lives then we are deeply satisfied.

The eucharist, the meal which Jesus gave us, is at its heart a prayer of thanksgiving. The prayer the priest says on your behalf is called the Great Thanksgiving. John the Gospel writer has deliberately told the story of the feeding of the 5,000 in the context of his teaching on Jesus as the Bread of Life. Eucharist means to give thanks.

The antidote to a spiral of dissatisfaction with ourselves and our world, is gratitude. To stop and take stock, to realise what a gift life itself is. None of us did anything to earn the right to be alive. It is total gift, and when we say thank you for it something that begins to bring a new light on all of life is switched on in our souls.

The diaries of Etty Hillesum are some of the most compelling spiritual writings of last century. She wrote from 1941 to 1943 in Holland, herself a persecuted Jew. She describes herself as a sophisticated but somewhat silly young woman studying psychology and literature. Trying to hide from the latest Nazi round up of Jews she felt herself suddenly and unaccountably needing to kneel in her bedroom, feelings of overwhelming gratitude forcing her to her knees. This was not an unrealistic gratitude. She knows the fate that awaits her and yet she notices the jasmine plant and the sky. She writes how exotic the jasmine looks “so delicate and dazzling against the mud brown walls. I can't take in how beautiful a thing the jasmine is, but there is no need to. It is simply enough to believe in miracles.”

Even at a time when murder was a state sponsored evil, Etty refused to take the beauty of the jasmine for granted. She was overwhelmed with thanksgiving. How much more then can we be grateful? What we have is enough. We are enough. God is enough and we are thankful.