

Look up and see the need

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Pentecost + 10 B – John 6 1-21

Jesus feeding the 5,000 and walking on water: in our reading last week from Mark's gospel, those two miracle stories were left out. Well today we've got them, but from John's gospel; not from Mark. And John gives the miracles a very different setting from Matthew, Mark and Luke. In Mark, we've tracked with disciples sent out on mission, Jesus ferried around the lake to escape the crowds, and dealing with John the Baptist's murder by Herod. But John's gospel is different. John sets the miracles straight after Jesus has been arguing with the religious leaders about having healed someone on the Sabbath. And after the two miracles, he'll be teaching everyone that he is the bread from heaven. We'll hear about that over the coming weeks.

At the recent commissioning of the new priest at Burnside, Lyndon Shakespeare, John's story of the feeding of the five thousand happened to be set as the reading. So the Archbishop preached on it. He focussed on a challenging aspect of that story. The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle story that appears in all four gospels, and John has some interesting differences from the others. Abp Geoff focussed on one of those differences. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, the weary, hungry disciples come and ask Jesus to send the crowds away so everyone can buy food for themselves. And when they do, Jesus challenges them to feed the crowd.

But Abp Geoff was struck by the fact that in John's Gospel, Jesus *looks up and sees* the crowd, and he asks Philip *where can we buy bread for everyone?* Philip is astounded and wonders where all the money's going to come from. A commentator (Karen Yust

FotW B 3 284) has fun describing the way modern church committees

might deal with this sort of request from Jesus, just like the disciples try to – *it's not in our mission budget; we don't have that sort of cash; what do you want? A miracle?*

Jesus *looks up and sees the need* and he's determined to respond. That's what the Archbishop noticed; Jesus *looks up and sees the need*. And Abp Geoff challenged the good parishioners at Burnside to do the same, just as he would no doubt have challenged us here. Do we as followers of Jesus *look up and see the need* around us like Jesus does. And do we hear Jesus ask us what we're going to do about the need when we see it? That funny commentator would imagine us turning our pockets inside out, looking helpless and whispering that our cupboard is bare. And it's true; like many churches, our mission budget is always something of an afterthought. So is there something we can do about it? As the Archbishop's gaze swept back and forth over us, by this stage, we were all feeling pretty uncomfortable.

But then he asked us to look at what the disciples had readily available – five loaves and two fish – and what eventually happened when it was offered to Jesus for him to share out. Jesus wasn't asking for more than we have; he just asked that we make available what we *do* have, and trust in his help for the rest. They started with just five loaves and a couple of fish and however you want to explain it, look what happened; everyone fed, and loads of leftovers. What's needed, and what can we start with?

So; *the need*. As I wrote in a recent weekly, we keep being reminded of an epidemic of loneliness in the Australian community. Despite being connected with each other via social media and myriad electronic communication options, we're realising that there's no substitute for actually being together in person.

The Covid experience has supercharged an epidemic of loneliness, isolation, depression and anxiety in people.

Children are refusing to go to school in record numbers. People don't want to be at work in person if they can work from home. They want to avoid the tension of being in work situations where people really don't behave well with each other, not to mention hours of lonely, frustrating commutes. But the electronic modes of being in touch are sometimes even more dangerous – and particularly for our children and grandchildren. cf Jonathan Haidt's book *The Anxious Generation*

Here we are a small community with a wonderful, abundant resource. We've spent a long time as a community where being kind, thoughtful, gracious, patient, generous and gentle is the normal way to be. We have ethical standards which are intended to make this community a place of safety and fulfilment and belonging for everyone. In our gospel story, we've seen Jesus *look up, see a need, and challenge us to meet that need*. And we are being called to address a deep hunger in people right now.

Our loaves and fish? I'm glad to say that we've begun something that answers this call, and that's the children's choir. The choir is a safe, delightful place for children of different ages to connect with each other in a way that's not electronically mediated; a place to enjoy each other's company in a safe, loving environment. Learning to sing *together* can help fix loneliness and anxiety; and singing itself is a lifelong skill and joy.

But what about the anxious, lonely adults out there? Let's share ideas. What invitation can I put on our notice board that might help meet a need you know of? I remember knitting groups making beanies for the desert people in winter, and ambulance care bears in the summer. We already have a group greening the parklands together. We have centring prayer groups. But what else to offer – it only need be as humble as five pitas and a couple of fish? What can we offer? Amen