

God Feeds the Hungry Heart

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Old Testament: Isaiah 55.1-5

New Testament: Romans 9.1-5

Gospel: Matthew 14.13-21

Introduction

Hunger is a fundamental human reality. It's so fundamental, our lives have depended on it since the very first hour after our birth.

All three of this morning's Bible readings circle around that idea – not simply physical hunger — although the story of the loaves and fish in Matthew certainly includes that — but the deeper hunger of the human heart.

I want to suggest this morning that, taken together, our readings reveal that God readily responds to human hunger - to our hunger - and that God does so with generosity, compassion, and love.

1. Isaiah 55:1–5 — God's Invitation

So we start with Isaiah. He cries out to all who are hungry and thirsty to come and buy wine and milk and bread.

It's one of the Bible's most beautiful and compelling invitations.

Two features stand out.

a. The invitation is universal

Firstly, it's universal - the call of God to come is addressed to 'everyone'.

This universality, this inclusivity, is what is so masterfully rendered in the famous Bach anthem we heard and pondered last Sunday morning. We saw how that piece suggests that there is a desire for God in every human being, and that longing finds ultimate joy and satisfaction only in Jesus. He alone is the 'joy of man's desiring'.

As humans we desire many things that - because they are spiritual - cannot be adequately explained from a secular viewpoint. We long, for instance, for meaning, purpose, belonging, and forgiveness, for hope, identity and love.

But we are prone to find substitutes - we spend our money, to quote Isaiah, on 'what is not bread' and we spend our labour 'what does not satisfy' (Isa 55.2). We chase substitutes that cannot give us the nourishment we crave.

So God's invitation to meet our spiritual hunger is for all because all humans have that hunger.

b. The invitation is free

But secondly, God's invitation is free. 'Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price', writes Isaiah. God's blessing, God's abundance, cannot be bought, or earned through human effort. It is simply received.

Grace is not a transaction; it is a feast. Trying harder to live the Christian life may temporarily make us feel our stomachs are satisfied. But it provides such little nourishment that the hunger soon returns.

So from Isaiah we learn that God's invitation is universal and it is free.

2. Romans 9:1–5 — Feeling the Hunger of Others

If Isaiah is offering God's invitation to a feast, Romans 9 is Paul's expression of God's heartache that God's people have declined that invitation.

It causes him 'great sorrow' and 'anguish', Paul writes, that, although God's chosen people had been entrusted with great privileges, including God's adoption and God's promises, they have ended up rejecting Jesus.

Paul's grief teaches us something vital: **true love feels the inner hunger of others**. To love people with God's love is not to be neutral about their spiritual flourishing. It is to yearn, with God, for their spiritual good. Love is not detached; it is invested.

One powerful way I find this expressed here at St John's is through our small groups and short courses, and, this year, our pilgrimages. Next Monday evening Judith and I will be joining the first session of the short course on John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

In that story, the pilgrim, called Christian, has a series of traumatic encounters on his way to the celestial city. But he receives refreshment and a nourishing meal at the Palace Beautiful from Prudence, Piety and Charity – three lovely sisters who care for his physical, emotional and spiritual needs.

It is a moving and heartwarming scene. And it is a picture of the church at its best: practicing warm acceptance, hospitality, encouragement, care and nourishment.

3. Matthew 14:13–21 — The God Who Feeds

If Isaiah is God's invitation to a feast, and Romans is Paul's longing for people to accept that invitation, our Matthew reading is a tangible foretaste of that feast.

Jesus withdraws to a deserted place. But when the crowds follow him, we read, he 'had compassion' on them.

Compassion is never just feeling. It involves action. Jesus heals, and then he feeds. The five loaves and two fish are woefully inadequate. But Jesus does not ask for *sufficiency* – only for *availability*. He takes what is offered, blesses it, breaks it, gives it, and multiplies it – so much so that there are twelve baskets of leftovers.

It is a picture of how grace works - God multiplies what we offer. The God of Isaiah 55, who offers to feed the hungry without price, now does so, and in abundance.

And this feeding points to another meal - the supper on the night Jesus was betrayed – which we recall and re-enact in this service. The bread and wine of the bread and wine of the eucharist are a foretaste of the ultimate fulfilment of Isaiah's promised banquet.

This is reflected in two further works of art this morning. The first is a fifth century mosaic, discovered in the floor in front of the communion table at a church in Galilee.¹ This artwork, beautiful in its apparent simplicity, appears to show five loaves and two fish. But does it? There are actually four loaves. Scholars have suggested various reasons for this, including that the fifth loaf is Jesus, the bread of life.

The other piece of art is the hauntingly beautiful anthem 'Ave Verum' by Mozart, which will be sung by our choir during the communion distribution this morning - it has these lines: 'Hail, true Body...be for us a sweet foretaste'.

4. The Grace our Readings Reveal

So our readings proclaim a God:

- **who invites** us to come to God with our hunger, rather than finding substitutes,
- and **who grieves** over our lostness and yearns for our flourishing,

¹ The Byzantine mosaic (visible [here](#) and at the end of this sermon) is located in the Roman Catholic Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fish, Tabgha, Galilee.

- and **who feeds** with compassion and abundance.

In *Pilgrim's Progress*, when Christian is accused by a devil-like character called Apollyon [Rev 9.5] of failing in his Lord, he does not deny it. He replies, 'All this is true but the Prince I serve is merciful and ready to forgive'.

This is grace - not us or God excusing our sin but God forgiving it fully and freeing us from its burden when we bring it honestly before him.

Conclusion

So the challenge for us this morning is threefold:

- First, it is **Isaiah's** challenge: "Why do you spend...on what does not satisfy?" We need to name before God the substitutes we chase — achievement, approval, distraction, vain pleasure, and self-reliance. The pathway leading to God's banquet is pathed not with accusation but with brokenness, humility, and honesty.
- Second, it is **Paul's** challenge: To love people in such a way that we feel their hunger, their lostness, their pain, and we help them to flourish.
- Third, it is **Jesus'** challenge. Not to bring to him anything what we do *not* have. But to bring to him what we *do* have, so that he can multiply it.

Perhaps this morning, as we take communion or receive a blessing, and as the choir sings Mozart's anthem, we take the opportunity to reach out to God and allow this foretaste of the heavenly banquet to become a real experience of Christ's forgiveness, nourishing, rest and peace.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

