

**SERMON FOR THE 18TH SUNDAY IN  
ORDINARY TIME 2.8.20  
ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD  
REV JORDAN GREATBATCH**

*Isaiah 55:1-5*

*Romans 9:1-5*

*Matthew 14:13-21*

Food is a particular topic that I love to talk about. A few years ago I had the pleasure of running a retreat for a day at the Beautiful Ayrlies garden in Whitford. The theme of the retreat day was of course food. Perhaps a strange thing to talk about when one is on retreat, but I think food is such a powerful thing.

On that retreat I showed a clip from a film called 'Babette's Feast.'. Babette's feast, if you have not seen it, is a wonderful film set in a small village on the remote western coast of Jutland in 19th-century Denmark. The film revolves around two elderly and

pious Christian sisters Martine and Philippa. Their father was a pastor who founded his own Christian sect. With their father now dead, and the austere sect drawing no new converts, the aging sisters preside over a dwindling congregation of white-haired believers.

The story flashes back 49 years, showing the sisters in their youth. The beautiful girls have many suitors, but their father rejects them all, and in the end both sisters decide to stay with their father and spurn any life away from Jutland.

Thirty five years later, Babette Hersant appears at their door. One day Babette wins the lottery of 10,000 francs. Instead of using the money to return to Paris and her lost lifestyle, she decides to spend it preparing a delicious dinner for the sisters and their small congregation. More than just a feast, the meal is an outpouring of Babette's appreciation, an act of self-sacrifice; Babette tells no one that she is spending her entire winnings on the meal.

The sisters accept both Babette's meal and her offer to pay for the creation of a "real French dinner". As the preparations commence, the sisters begin to worry that the meal will become a sin of sensual luxury, if not some form of devilry. In a hasty conference, the sisters and the congregation agree to eat the meal, but to forego speaking of any pleasure in it, and to make no mention of the food during the dinner

However Babette's gifts breaks down their distrust and superstitions, elevating them physically and spiritually. Old wrongs are forgotten, ancient loves are rekindled, and a mystical redemption of the human spirit settles over the table.

It is such a wonderful scene, the power of food at work. Today's Gospel is about the same thing, food. Food was, is, and always will be one of the most important parts of any human life. Some people have none, some little, and

some too much. Food has power, for good and for bad.

Food in Jesus' time was certainly connected with power.

The world of the first-century Roman Empire was marked by significant inequalities concerning food access. People knew food insecurity and struggled on a daily and seasonal basis for adequate food and nutrition. The empire was very hierarchical in its social structure with a small group of ruling elites who enjoyed abundant variety and good quality of food. But most of the population lived around, at, or below subsistence level with inadequate calorific and nutritional intake. The petition in the Lord's prayer that God will supply daily bread reflects this situation (6:11).

Food access reflected the elite's access to power that controlled resources. The lack of food was one of the ways many people

experienced the injustice of this disparity of power. It is also one of the reasons we see so many sick people in the gospels. Diseases of deprivation were rife.

Therefore in this context Jesus' feeding of the five thousand is more than just 'a miracle story' but is in fact about the use and abuse of power. Jesus, by the act of feeding this crowd is challenging all our notions of fairness, power and privilege.

This was because he was living out the mandate of God which is found in its most explicit form in the Hebrew Scriptures.

That tradition explicitly identifies God's will that hungry people be fed. God provides food for the wilderness generation (Exodus 16). Ezekiel condemns Israel's leaders or "shepherds" for failing to feed the sheep/people (Ezekiel 34:1-10). The prophet Isaiah declares God's will that people "share your bread with the hungry" (Isaiah 58:7, 10).

This tradition carries on into Matthew's Gospel where we have Jesus endorsing the merciful practice of almsgiving that redistributes resources to those in need (Matthew 6:2-4). He defends the practice of procuring food as a way of honouring the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-8). He also declares that the nations will be judged in part on whether they have provided food for the hungry (25:32-42). There is this powerful tradition of confronting the injustice of the hungry.

Jesus' action here in Matthew 14:13-21 highlights and confronts this injustice of the Roman world with an action that enacts God's will to feed hungry people and that anticipates the coming age in which God will supply abundant food.

So when is this coming age when the hungry will be feed? Tomorrow, 50 years? 1000 years away? Somehow I don't think so. Jesus spoke of the coming age or as he put it 'The

Kingdom of God' as something that he was inaugurating. John the Baptist states this point so clearly in Mark chapter 1 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

John saw Jesus's coming as the coming of 'The Kingdom of God'. Not an event far off in the future, but something to be lived out in the here and now. Jesus' act of feeding the five thousand is an act of opposition against those who do not share their bread, those who have too much bread, and those who control the bread. Whether or not you read this story as a literal one, its power and meaning are still the same. God feeds the hungry, and therefore as God's people, we are called to do the same.

But what a daunting task it is. In this country, and in many counties around the world, people struggle for their daily needs and it can seem an almost impossible task. But we here at All Saints are in fact already involved, though you may not know it. Our food bank is run by a

team of amazing volunteers, food is donated by you, and we meet a small part of a big need.

We can take heart that we do our small bit. But God is always calling us to bigger things, perhaps he is calling us to be more aware, more involved in the feeding of our city, not just through food banks but issues of social inequality, wages and access to education which all contribute to the inability to access food.

May we each know that call, and may Jesus lead us and feed us this morning to be Gospel people, people of good news.

The story today is all about abundance. And we are going to share a little bit of abundance together this morning. As we share in Eucharist together. Eucharist is about what we hold dear; love, hospitality and welcome. It is in fact a bit like Babette's feast, it is about abundance, relationships and celebration, and so let us come and eat.