

29<sup>th</sup> July 2012 – 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Jn 6:1-15,  
19:00 Grahamstown Cathedral

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Bread and wilderness do not go together, so says Gordon Lathrop when commenting on this passage. He goes on by asserting that bread is the result of a long development in human culture, one of the earliest products of agriculturally settled humankind but possible only as grain and cultivation, tools for grinding, and fire for baking came to be discovered. Wilderness is usually a word used for the absence of such culture and development, a place devoid of ordered fields, where food is scarce.

Assembly and wilderness do not go together either. Wilderness is no place for a crowd to gather, or for a meeting. The people could die there! So when a crowd nonetheless gathers, far away from farms and shops, Jesus rightly asks, “where are we to find bread for these people to eat?”

Human beings have always asked this question. How shall I find food for myself? How shall I find food for those who are my responsibility? How can I organize the world so that I can get bread? For many of us these questions have become obscured. We are more likely to ponder whether it’s the meal option I like or the manky mess that doesn’t match its description online? Or will I need to contact the folks for a little extra to get through the month? Perhaps we only ask the oddly reversed form of the question: am I eating too much?

And of course these questions become cloaked in a consumer society of plentiful and diverse foods. Spiritual food seems to come in a thousand flavours too. As my friend Pete Houston says; “We are in the age of Consumer Spirituality. I can go elsewhere and will. If the effort proves too much to effect a change in my local church, I can go elsewhere. If what I consume on a Sunday doesn't work for me, I go elsewhere.

Paul Siaki likes to make a pithy distinction between service and serve us. He says we desperately need Christians to move from thinking how the church can serve us to how we can be of service. Clever. "Well done, good and faithful, servant," are the words I want to hear in the End. "Well done, good and faithful, consumer," just doesn't have the same ring to it...

Questions around food for our bodies and our souls should lead us to ask some of the basic questions of life. When and how shall I die? What is it for me to truly live? In the context of some of these anxieties, it may seem that every place we come to is a wilderness. We may perceive varsity, res, digs, even our church as a wilderness, essentially unconcerned with our survival, threatening, not necessarily organized to help us. Food that tames these anxieties, food that truly gives life in the face of death, food that responds to our deepest hungers, often seems elusive or unavailable.

Yet, according to our Gospel narrative, it is precisely in the wilderness where bread is found. From the five barley loaves and two fish there flows a great feast, with basketfuls left over. The chaotic crowd itself becomes an ordered meeting, with a strong centre in Jesus and in the food, but without walls, welcoming all, in the midst of the wilderness, now seen as a friendly place. At our best this Church should be an assembly with a strong centre and a very porous circumference. Is this Cathedral a house in the wilderness or the fortress of a closed worldview? Are we primarily concerned about Jesus in this place, is Christ at the centre of our worship? Do we make all people feel welcome here, do we go out of our way to include those who are on the fringes?

Many biblical scholars have suggested that the miracle in this narrative is not one of multiplication but rather the miracle of sharing. Traditionally or literally this story is often interpreted as Jesus the magician, who waves his magic wand and increases the five loaves and two fish, miraculously producing more food than the crowd could eat. God could do this... for the hand who flung the stars into space, bulking up bread supplies should be a cinch. But what if the real miracle was transforming a selfish mob into a sharing group of people?

Have you ever walked to the shops with friends and waited to open your chocolate till you were in your room so you didn't have to share it with your friends? It is entirely possible that many of the crowd that followed Jesus into the wilderness were carrying food with them... it took a courageous little boy who offered what he had to Jesus for the miracle to be initiated... the miracle of sharing and selfless giving, which results in the abundance.

The feeding of the five thousand was told this evening, not in order for you to imagine that if you had ever seen such a miracle, you, too, might become a believer. The gospel is read, not to make you wish that you had been there at some supposed past event. The story is told for this meeting, on this Sunday, for this Student service!

The story may remain mere words on the pages of our pew bibles, or we could choose to imbue them with life. You may not have brought sermon snacks with you, though gnawing on some biltong during the service may be appealing and do wonders for church growth. Biltong aside, each of us brings to this place gifts and abilities, we bring certain financial resources and when we withhold these things the Cathedral remains a wilderness. When we withhold our finances the church struggles to feed the poor. When we withhold our gifts and abilities the body of Christ, the church, remains dysfunctional.

There really are, at this time, famines, parched earth, bloated bellies, dying children, people stupefied by their malnutrition, and this in spite of the adequacy of food supplies in the world. There also really are, at this very time, dying species, starving fish, famished birds and hunger crazed mammals. If we have any imagination, or any ability at compassion, these situations become our own, forming themselves as burning issues in our own mind, connecting our own needs to the wider need, provoking us to be questioners of the systems in our world which perpetuate hunger on the one hand, and gluttony on the other.

Tonight we heard again of that old miracle in the wilderness... yet right here and right now we have the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of a little boy who sought to give rather than consume. Each time we choose to give, each time we choose to swim in the opposite direction of our consumerist society, each time we ask, how can I serve... we stand at the brink of a miracle, for God receives our merge offerings and unleashes the grace of a kingdom that is not of this world!

Amen