

High St Uniting Church Frankston

Feasting with Christ Matthew 14:13 - 21



Which image do you relate to more? And this is not just about style – realistic versus stylistic – it’s about the understanding of the story.

The disciples experiencing and joining in a miracle produced by Jesus? Or the joyous, welcoming, involving Jesus introducing the disciples to the possibilities of faith?

The disciples feel overwhelmed by the size of the crowd and want Jesus to send the people away. But Jesus wants his compassion to be contagious and so he tells the disciples to feed the people. “We can’t feed this enormous crowd; we only have a few small morsels” is the disciples initial response. And Jesus invites them into possibility and faith by saying, “Give them to God.”

This story, one of the few that appears in all four Gospels, although with detail differences, like the memorable detail of the boy offering the loaves and fish that is only in John, is so rich in connections to other scripture that ten preachers could craft twenty different sermons from it. And multiply that by four for the four different Gospel accounts. All the meanings to do with Jesus and his identity, the connections to stories of old, the connection to the Last Supper and hence our Eucharist, and even the feeding being a lived-out extension of the parable of the mustard seed. But, at its heart, Matthew makes his telling of the story of the feeding of the thousands about Jesus and the disciples feeling overwhelmed. And that is what has captured my attention today; coloured by the situation of the church in this culture and time. This is a lesson in resources that Jesus gave the disciples. Not enough becomes plenty, and excess, through faithfully offering the little you have to God in Christ.

Where Mark and Luke, and even John, situate this story of the feeding as the crowds interrupting Jesus being with the disciples, Matthew seems to go out of his way to make Jesus going into the wilderness all about Herod having John beheaded. Scholars point to all sorts of scriptural connections and illusions shaping Matthew’s telling, but what he has given us, is a real Jesus grieving for his cousin. When Jesus heard about John, he went off to be alone. And the compassion of Jesus for the crowds is suddenly even more remarkable. Like a prefiguring of the cross instead of the Last Supper, here we have Jesus setting aside his needs, his humanity, and his pain to address the needs, the illnesses, and the hunger of the crowd.

While the story says Jesus went off in a boat on his own, given what was required to sail a boat on the lake, a more realistic reading would have some of the disciples with Jesus heading to a secluded place. The disciples have been there all the time with Jesus and the crowd, probably engaged in a bit of crowd control, putting up with complaints about the location and the lack of resources, and why are there so many people, I can’t hear Jesus.

And so, it's natural that they come to Jesus near dusk and say, "It's getting late and there's nothing here, send the crowds away so they can find some food". Subtext, "We have had enough of this lot, there's too many for us to deal with, make them go away".

This is a great, and beloved story, because we can all identify with what is happening. The leaders are distracted and dealing with big issues in their lives. The workers are struggling with a load of needs that threatens to swamp them. And we all just want the problems to go away.

But what happens next? Jesus doesn't make the problem go away. He doesn't take over and solve the problem, he invites the disciples to dig into their faith and find an answer! He shows them that the resources they thought were not enough are more than enough! You take the resources you have; you thank God for them, you apportion them according to need, you distribute them through your own labour and personal engagement, and instead of a lack, you suddenly have leftovers!

Whether this is a miracle story or an example of faithful, generous action embarrassing others into joining in, the message is the same. Instead of getting lost in 'woe is us, we're getting smaller and older, and we don't have the resources to meet the needs of the world', do what Jesus did. Thank God for what you do have and get on with the task of acting in the world with compassion and hospitality. Your faithful action will activate resources you didn't think you had, your example will inspire others to join you, and suddenly, instead of lack, you will have enough and to spare.

As a church, we seem to have fallen into the practice of management with every project and ministry requiring complete planning and approval. All I's dotted and T's crossed, all spreadsheets calculated and balanced, all risk assessments signed off. And many of us are left asking, "Where is the faith? Where is the belief in our generous, resource rich God?"

Are the stories of Jesus just that, or can we adopt into our practice the Bible study method of placing ourselves in the story and identifying with the characters? Can we imagine ourselves as the disciples, engaged with Jesus in the ministry, being taught by Jesus, and then living out Jesus' stories every day? In faith we can move beyond our exasperation of wanting the problems to just go away. In faith we can find answers, we can meet needs, and we can live out what it means to be the followers of Jesus.