

<b>Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2020</b> <b>Cathedral, Grahamstown</b> <b>Live-streamed on Facebook,</b> <b>9.30 a.m.</b>		<b>9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost</b> <b>Prisoners and those who minister to them</b> <b>August – Month of Compassion</b> <b>Women’s Month</b>
Isaiah 55:1-5	Ps 145:8-9. 14-21	Romans 9:1-5 Matthew 14:13-21
<b>INVITATION TO THE BANQUET OF LIFE</b>		

“Taking the five loaves and the two fish, Jesus looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled...” (Matthew 14:19-20).

The month of August is known as the Month of Compassion; it is also Women’s Month. During our Sunday services of Evening Prayer, we shall be hearing from five women preachers. We look forward to their input and voices being heard.

**THE SCRIPTURES**

Our two central readings for today – Isaiah and the Gospel - both present us with the image of a meal. It is a meal given freely to all who ask. It is a meal offered to us as a sign of God’s grace. It is a meal offered as food for our souls: food that satisfies, that fills, that restores, that makes us whole. It is a meal of the kingdom of God, in which we are invited to share the food of the love of God, in stark contrast to the food, the ways, of this world.

Isaiah 55 is a word of hope to those in exile: the people of Israel, defeated and their nation dispersed and carried off into exile in Babylon many years before; the kingship itself destroyed, the temple in ruins, the land lost – all as signs of God’s judgment on a sinful and faithless people. There is a terrible word given to the last king, Hezekiah: “Some of your own sons who are born to you shall be taken away: they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon” (Isaiah 39:7). From then until Isaiah 40 is a gap of about 150 years when God, it would seem, is silent. But then Isaiah comes with a new word of hope. To the people in exile in Babylon, God now promises – offers - a new life: food, water, wine and milk, offered freely (Isaiah 55:1). It is the food of the gospel, the life of dependence and trust in God.

Walter Brueggemann: “Israel is invited to choose the free, alternative nourishment offered by Yahweh... As an alternative to Babylonian junk food, Israel is summoned to listen, as was ancient Israel, to the offer of the rich food of the gospel of Yahweh...”<sup>1</sup> Isaiah calls the people to accept this food, and also reminds them of the fidelity, the faithfulness of God – the everlasting covenant, “my steadfast, sure love for David” (Is 55:3). God has not forgotten his people.

The Gospel reading is also an invitation to a meal. Jesus is the host. It takes place just after another meal, another banquet, at which John the Baptist had been beheaded –

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann, W. 1998. *Isaiah 40-66*, 159

and we shall return to that later. But for the moment our attention is on what happens in this deserted place. Jesus has gone there by boat to be alone. But thousands follow him. He has compassion on them and cures their sick. It is evening and there is no food, or so it seems. The disciples suggest that the crowd be sent off to find food. Instead, Jesus tells the disciples to give them something to eat. All they can find are five loaves and two fish. They bring this to Jesus. The people are seated. Jesus takes the bread, looks up to heaven in thanksgiving, blesses and breaks the bread and fish, and gives it to the disciples. The disciples give it to the people. About five thousand men, besides women and children, are fed; and there are twelve baskets of food left over.

The story is filled with symbolism. It is a Eucharistic encounter, in which Jesus takes bread, blesses, breaks and gives. It points to the Last Supper when Jesus took bread and the cup of wine, with the words, “this is my body”, “this is my blood”. It is the banquet over which Jesus presides as our host. It is a foretaste of the coming of the kingdom of God. Jesus satisfies our hunger and thirst for heavenly food, our longing for the treasure, the pearl of great price, that makes life worth living. The Christian apologist and author, CS Lewis, describes his search for God as a search for joy – for that place and encounter with fulfilment, when our deepest longings are met by the highest wonder of encounter and delight<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Lewis, CS 1955. *Surprised by Joy*, 63

We are invited to take part in the meal, the banquet, in three ways.

## **1. FEEDING THE HUNGRY**

Covid has propelled us into a far greater awareness of the need to feed people. The food parcels and vouchers that go out every couple of weeks meet a very real need – just as the hungry people were fed by Jesus, in our Gospel reading. People continue to be in need and I am grateful to all who help with food, in any way. We are like those disciples who bring the five loaves and two fish to Jesus: we offer what we have and who we are. Jesus takes us, blesses, breaks and transforms us, and gives us to be life for the world.

## **2. THE TWO BANQUETS**

The feeding of the five thousand comes immediately after a very different sort of banquet: that of Herod Antipas. In fulfilment of his foolish promise to Herodias' daughter Salome, Herod orders the beheading of John the Baptist (Matt 14:1-12). That banquet was a scene of lust and greed. Herod was so captivated by the seductive dancing of Salome that he makes a foolish promise. He is weak, corrupt and brutal in his use of power. Herodias his wife abuses her position of authority. The girl Salome is used as a tool, a pawn. John the Baptist is betrayed and ultimately murdered.

We have in this juxtaposition of these two meals, an invitation to be part of the meal – the way - that leads to life. But there is also a warning. These two meals are all around us. Where do we find ourselves? With Herod and Herodias and Salome – where Salome is used as a pawn, where women are simply tools? Where power is abused? The meal of corruption and greed, so prevalent in SA at the moment? The meal of gender-based violence? Or the meal with Jesus and the disciples, offering what we have, to be blessed and broken – transformed – and given so that others may be fed, and have life?

### **3. INVITATION TO LIFE**

Just as Isaiah invited the people to the banquet of the Lord, the water and food and wine freely given, so Jesus invites us to eat with him. To share in this meal of compassion and mercy and healing. A gospel meal. To come to this place where lives are restored and made new. Jesus invites us to find life, to eat, to embrace the love of God, to receive God's grace, freely given, to eat of the heavenly food, to receive the pearl of great price, the joy beyond words.

Many are struggling at this time: heartache, bereavement, fear, uncertainty; purposelessness, loneliness. We come to Jesus as did those crowds of people. Allow him to heal us. To restore us. To give us strength and courage.

## **CONCLUSION**

May Christ feed us all with his heavenly food. Amen.

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Dean of Grahamstown  
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