

Year A Proper 18
Genesis 32: 22-31
Isaiah 55: 1-5
Matthew 14: 13-21

What a rich feast of readings we have today.

You may wonder why we have two Old Testament readings today and no Epistle. Well, it's because I think we have so much to learn from both of them and, together with the Gospel, they offer a cohesive theme of searching – God searching for us and us searching for God.

First let's turn to Genesis and Jacob's all-night wrestle with God. I say that, but the Hebrew is vague about exactly who his opponent is, but let's assume it was God, or at least an angel of God. As I'm sure you remember, the struggle comes just before his scheduled meeting with Esau, whom of course he had cheated out of his birthright. No doubt Jacob, being the sort of deceiving schemer that he was, was plotting some sort of strategy to get out of any potential trouble. Indeed, he had sent a very generous gift on ahead of him to try and buy off Esau.

As some commentators suggest, our ultimate struggles are with God. It is in God's presence that we can fight our demons, it is to God that we finally surrender. But equally this is not a protective God we see here, this is a God who is desperate to see Jacob become the person he was intended to be, and if it takes an all-night wrestle, so be it.

This story tells us that we have a God who is willing to get dirty in the mud, eager to engage with us, who isn't willing to let go – in fact rather like the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son. In both instances God goes out of his way to search out two of the more unsavoury characters in the Bible – because, to coin a phrase, they're worth it. And if they are worth it, you and I are worth it, even if we find that hard to believe.

In the end God 'cheats' as it were and dislocates Jacob's hip, at which point Jacob hangs on like a drowning man until he receives a blessing. We have to accept that a blessing and a limp often go together in God's world.

Think of St Paul who asked three times for God to remove the thorn in his flesh. We are never told what the thorn is, but it was clearly important enough

for Paul to want to be rid of it. Paul had had a mighty blessing, for which we are grateful to this day, but, apparently, he also needed to be reminded of his dependence on God, hence the thorn. Indeed, saying I want the blessing but not the limp is not really an option – as Paul found out. We are not in a position to dictate the terms of the blessing.

Turning to the Isaiah reading it's slightly odd that it ends where it does because verse 7 tells us what this banquet of fine food and drink consists of – it's God's mercy and forgiveness. On the face of it, it seems odd that Isaiah should say in one breath come and buy and in the next stress that it's all free. And what is on offer goes way beyond the basics, it, it's not just bread and water, it's wine and milk, it's rich food as it says in verse 2.

Which must have been a very odd thing for the Israelites in exile to hear when they were suffering from scarcity. The point is, in the context of what Isaiah is saying about a new covenant, that the new David, the suffering servant, i.e., Jesus, has already picked up the tab, has already paid the bill.

That's why the compassion and forgiveness are free, that's why we can safely turn to God to permanently quench our thirst and satisfy our hunger, but we need to go searching for what's freely on offer – which is a full and abundant life. Seek and you shall find as Jesus says in Matthew 7:7.

But we are all a bit suspicious of free offers aren't we? Either we think they are not worth having, or else we think there's a hidden catch, but of course neither is true when it comes to God's special offers.

When it comes to our Gospel reading, both Jesus and the 5,000 are searching – albeit for very different things. Jesus wanted, indeed needed, some peace and quiet to make sense of the body blow of the execution of his cousin John the Baptist, while the crowds were impatient to know how Jesus would react, and more specifically whether he was the promised Messiah who would overthrow their hated oppressors – and so they followed him.

As Tom Wright says, how would you feel if you received some really bad news and slipped into a church for seek some solace in peace and quiet only to find you had wandered into a healing service with a band leading the worship. Or you had gone up into the hills and suddenly found yourself surrounded by a hundred happy hikers?

You or I would almost certainly would have turned tail and gone in the opposite direction as fast as possible. Not Jesus – his anger, his sadness, his weariness, his own sorrow were all set aside in an instant and replaced by a deep compassion and sorrow for the crowd.

So, he spent the day healing them, and he spent so much time doing it that suddenly it was evening with thousands of people a long way from home and food. Now what? Well, the disciples, perhaps wanting to show the same sort of compassion that Jesus was showing, suggest sending everyone away to give them an opportunity to get some food.

Good idea, you'd think, and in many ways it was, but Jesus turns it right round and says to the disciples and says you feed them. Whatat?? We haven't got enough to feed ourselves, look five loaves and two fishes. That's fine says Jesus, I'll take whatever you can offer me, however little that is, and work with that. And of course, as we heard, Jesus does just that.

So however large or small our offering, it is more than enough for God's purposes because the kingdom of heaven is like the mustard seed or the leaven in the dough, a little goes a very long way.

There can be little doubt that this miracle can be seen, indeed probably should be seen, as a foretaste of the Eucharist.

Ken Bailey, an American theologian who spent most of his working life in the Middle East, tells of a well-attested story of a modern equivalent of the feeding of the 5,000. About 20 years ago, a Christian woman in a Middle Eastern country was preparing a pot of rice for the poor on a feast day and asked some of her non-Christian neighbours to help distribute it to the poor. The woman prayed over the rice that it would be sufficient to feed all those who came.

After her neighbours had been distributing it for a few minutes one of them came back into the kitchen and exclaimed We don't understand what is happening, we have been handing out large bowlfuls for some time but the level of the rice in the pot isn't going down.

Isn't that the point? God takes what we have, whether it's a little or a lot, and uses it for his own purposes. The crowd was searching for worldly things, i.e., power and the illusion of freedom, when it chased after Jesus, but Jesus

showed them what was worth searching for – the abundance of God’s grace and love, the rich food and drink that was without cost that Isaiah was talking about.

But of course, with Jesus there is always more going on than meets the eye. The baskets of leftovers remind us that with God there is always more than enough. However paltry we think our own offering is, whether it is an offering of compassion, of money, of spiritual gifts, of time, it is still more than enough.

God didn’t chase after Jacob because he was rich, he doesn’t chase after people today because they are nice or successful or powerful, he searches high and low for all us, for the corrupt, the criminal, the crooks, the deceitful just as much as he does for the poor, the sick, the suffering, precisely because God thinks everyone is worth it, that everyone should have the opportunity to be person He intended them to be. And there are any number of Biblical characters we can choose to identify with on any of those scores.

And isn’t a God who has an abundance of resources to meet each of our needs, and more besides, a God who never suffers from compassion fatigue, a God of mercy and forgiveness, worth searching for on our part too?

Ho everyone who thirsts,
 come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
 come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without price.

²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
 and your labour for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
 and delight yourselves in rich food.

³Incline your ear, and come to me;
 listen, so that you may live.

Amen