

Year A Proper 18. 2nd August 2026.

Isaiah 55:1-5. Romans 9:1-5. Matthew 14: 13-21

What a rich feast we have in the Isaiah and Gospel readings today. Starting with the Isaiah reading it's slightly odd that it ends where it does at the end of verse 5 because in verse 7 it 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'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 we can safely turn to God to permanently quench our thirst and satisfy our hunger, and why we also need to go searching for the full and abundant life that is on offer. 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.

I am going to cheat a little and also talk about the other Old Testament reading set for today. It comes from Genesis 32 and talks about Jacob's all-night wrestle with God. I say that, but the original Hebrew is vague about exactly who his opponent is. As I'm sure you remember, the struggle comes just before his scheduled meeting with Esau, whom of course he cheated out of his birthright, and 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.

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 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 deep down we can 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.

Why have I chosen to talk about the two Old Testament readings rather than the rather short reading from Romans? 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.

When it comes to our Gospel reading, both Jesus and the 5,000 men, together with uncounted women and children, 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, which Matthew records in the verses before today's passage, 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 to 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. Whaat?? 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.

Perhaps You give them something to eat is really what's at the heart of this miracle. Jesus said it to his disciples then and he says it to his disciples now. People are physically and spiritually hungry now, just as they were then. So, Jesus is saying, you do something about it, dream bigger as it were, and God will respond.

There is enough food to go round to feed everybody in the world, the issue is how it's distributed. It depends on how you divide it up. Some writers see this miracle as more of a parable about how we see the world. Are we people who share, or are we people who hoard? What does it mean to share the world God has given us?

Which brings us back in a sense to the death of John the Baptist. His execution was in the middle of an exclusive birthday feast Herod was throwing for the rich and powerful. The feeding of the 5,000 was more of a community picnic for the poor and marginalised. As Christians which party do we want to be at?

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. In about 2003, 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. So maybe we have more to offer than we think. But 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 yeast in the dough, a little goes a very long way.

The crowd was searching for worldly things, i.e. the power and the illusion of freedom that they thought Herod and his cronies enjoyed, when it chased after with Jesus, but Jesus showed them what was worth searching for – the abundance of God's grace and love.

The baskets of leftovers remind us that with God there is always enough. However paltry we think our own offering is, whether an offering of compassion, of money, of spiritual gifts, of time, it is still enough. We know how much we have been blessed. We are not called to be hoarders like Herod and his friends, we are called to share our blessings with those who have little or nothing.

God didn't chase after Jacob because he was rich, and he doesn't chase after people today because they are nice or successful or powerful, he searches high and low for all of us, for the corrupt, the criminal, the crooks, 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 isn't a God who has enough 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?