

Reflection: St Andrews on The Terrace, 17 May 2020  
Rev Dr Niki Francis

Readings:

John 6:1-21

Taiawhiowhio by Haare Williams

"Some people" by Anne Powell

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**Simple generosity: Two small fish and five barley loaves**

Almost every day during lockdown I've looked out my windows and seen people fishing on the beach. Yes, even in Level 4. Apparently, there are plenty of good kahawai out here at Eastbourne. It's also a great spot for pipi, scallops, mussels and paua.

But perhaps I'm giving secrets away!

All year round we see whole families in the bays up to their thighs in the water digging shellfish out of the sand, and people diving for mussels, paua and scallops. It reminds me of my childhood family expeditions around the Waitemata and Manukau coastlines to fish and collect shellfish in 1950s and 1960s Auckland. I bet there isn't much marine life around there now.

I think we did it for the pure pleasure. My English Master Mariner dad loved the coast and loved seafood. I inherited both those loves.

Here in Eastbourne, I sometimes stop and chat to the people fishing and diving, or at least I did before lockdown. There's a mix of those who do it because they love it as a leisure activity and those who do it to feed their families.

I have wondered about the families who couldn't fish during Level 4 and how they have coped for food. Nadine Ann Hura's words in her commentary on how the

lockdown highlights glaring inequities in Aotearoa made me think further. She wrote:

Follow the rules kia haumaruru te haere, queue outside Countdown for two hours but don't collect pipi in the beds that sustained our tīpuna for generations.

Can you feel the loss in that sentence? The disempowerment? The hunger?

It leads me to this reflection. I've gone off-piste from the lectionary this week, but have stayed with the Gospel of John. The loaves and fishes spoke to me, partly because of my location by the sea but also because I could see a weaving of this story with the 8 points of progressive Christianity. Are you aware of these? Catriona sent them to me recently and they pretty much fit with my thinking. If you haven't seen them, they basically affirm Jesus as a teacher for us to follow and to walk as he did, with radical compassion, inclusion and bravery, to confront injustice.

So: Jesus, fishing, injustice, and food led me to the story of the loaves and fishes for today.

The story is clearly significant for the Christian tradition: it appears in all four gospels, and twice in Mark and Matthew.

So, to the story:

On this day, Jesus sailed from Capernaum to the eastern side of the sea of Galilee, about 6.5 kilometres away - a bit less than the distance from Queens Wharf in Wellington to Matiu or Somes Island in the harbour.

Many people were on the move for Passover, the feast associated with Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt. Word had got around about Jesus's earlier actions when he turned water into wine at the wedding at Cana, healed the Gentile official's son and gave new life to the disabled man. A crowd rushed around the shore to follow him. Jesus and his disciples

walked up to a large grassy plain where they sat and watched the crowd moving towards them.

It was the end of the day and the crowds were hungry so Jesus turned to Philip, who is a local, and asked, "where are we to buy bread so that these people may eat?"

Andrew pipes up that he has found a boy with five barley loaves and two fish. The boy is willing to share his food despite not having much. His fish would have been the small fish, no bigger than sardines, that swarmed in the Sea of Galilee. His barley bread was the humblest of breads.

Jesus took the boy's offerings, blessed them and distributed them among the people. Amazingly, according to the story, the people ate their fill and after that there remained enough to fill 12 baskets!

It's an extraordinary story. Remember that John Spong urges us against reading the gospel literally. But the fact that this story survived in various forms six times in the gospels, tells us it is significant. But in what way?

We already know that the writers of John's Gospel take stories from the Jesus tradition. They mould them to make statements about Jesus, for Jewish Christians in first century Jerusalem who were despairing at the split in their community and the fact that Jesus had not returned.

Spong asserts that in these stories John wraps Jesus in traditions about Moses to strengthen Jesus's importance and significance to the Jewish community. Just as Yahweh enabled Moses to feed the hungry Israelites in the desert by raining bread from heaven, Jesus feeds 5000 with a couple of fish and few loaves of bread. Immediately after this story, Jesus walks on water. Just as God parts the Red Sea for Moses to lead the Israelites in exodus from Egypt, Jesus also demonstrates power over water.

The Gospel writer uses images of daily necessities like bread, water, light and life from the Torah to reassure the Jewish Christians of Jesus's significance.

So that was for them. What about us today in Aotearoa New Zealand? Can we look to this story for some guidance on how to work toward peace and justice among all people? Can we take the loaves and fishes story as a commentary on wealth, poverty and inequality in the world today? In Aotearoa? There are likely to be academics out there who cringe at this approach but I will surmise anyway and share my favourite interpretation with you:

Travellers would usually take food with them when they set out on their journeys. Some of the crowd at this time just before the Passover probably had food. A small boy did. Maybe many relied on hospitality. Perhaps those with food were not willing to share. Could it be that the boy's generosity inspired others to share so that all could eat their fill and still there were leftovers? If a miracle occurred here it could be that the small boy's humble offering changed hearts, opened them to the needs of others.

So too, perhaps this story of a child's generosity with what little he had, can inspire us to open our wallets if we are able, and our hearts, not only to provide food for those who are hungry, but also to accept people who are different from us, and even be generous towards ourselves about things we struggle with. We all have gifts to offer, however humble they may be. Let's be the like the boy who had so little yet shared his meagre portion. Let's share what we can to work toward peace and justice among all people and all life on Earth.

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