

## **Meals in Luke**

Easter Term, 2015

26th April, Rev Dr Simon Perry, Sermon 1

3rd May, Mr Ross Reason, Sermon 2

10th May, Dr Colin Fairweather, Sermon 3

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**Rev Dr Simon Perry**

## **Meals in Luke**

Luke 7:36-50

This term we are looking at meals in the Gospel of Luke. One scholar has argued that the whole of Luke's Gospel is structured around seven meals that take place – and whilst he's probably wrong, it does offer a genuinely thought-provoking perspective on Jesus of Nazareth.

It's not much of an exaggeration to say that the Kingdom of God is all about food. The foundational image for the kingdom of God is being invited to a huge feast where there is lots of food and very nice wine. Food and wine is not simply some metaphor for a happy life – it is a fundamental dimension of what it means to be part of the Kingdom. Eating is serious business.

In fact, it is so widely recognised that eating together is basic to human wellbeing, that there is very little serious academic work published on the subject. You only have to look around you though – eating together is a serious part of college life, where students regularly are invited to eat dine in hall with excellent food and exceptionally adequate wine. The same is true of course, on Sunday evenings where everyone is invited to a sumptuous feast of Doritos, Monster Munch or Wotsits combined with Fine Wine and Fresh Juice in the Auditorium Lounge.

Coming from a family where cooking was not regarded as a serious life skill, my taste buds remain haunted by vomit-inducing memories of suet pudding that tasted like wax, cheese cake that had a little too much of a cheese component, and – on the one occasion my parents made a gastronomic effort - charred remains of god-knows-what organs from god-knows-what creature – presented with an exotic French name. People from my background simply regard food as fuel. So why is the God of Israel apparently so obsessed with food and what has it god to do with the Kingdom of God?

It's a difficult question to answer when you come from a culture where obesity is more of a problem than hunger, where gaining weight is more of a worry than losing weight. Why is food important to humanity, beyond being mere fuel? Well, according to the self-esteem expert, Gok Wan. (Yes, 'self-esteem expert' – I'd love to know what qualifications you need for that title- beyond telling women who are self-conscious about their bodies to remove their clothes on national television.) According to Gok Wan, if you eat the right yoghurt, it aids your intestinal transition – and you should eat the right yoghurt, because 'feeling good, starts from within.' I don't think the God of Israel was overly concerned about the intestinal transition of the Israelites.

Jesus lived in Lower Galilee, a region that was teeming with natural resources – but those who worked the land did not get to benefit from it. As the first century progressed, it looks as though economic hardship was the norm – and the extent to which the region was taxed by temple, by Jewish leaders and by Roman overlords, eventually brought the economy to its knees. Poverty was marked in the first instance not by your individual lack of economic resources, by social exclusion in various forms. Being outcast, being a sinner, being a leper, being disabled or orphaned or widowed or poor, meant that you tasted not only the physical but the social dimension of social exclusion. That was poverty – so when Jesus pitches up and speaks about the Kingdom of God in terms of a massive feast, there are two things going on.

Firstly – inviting people to a meal is an excellent means of social inclusion. A companion, is literally someone with whom you break bread. For any pious Jew – eating food is not a merely physical process. You couldn't eat a biscuit without praying a special Jewish prayer. Not 'please don't let this biscuit go straight onto my hips', but a prayer of gratitude. The Jewish precursor of saying grace – a thank you for a meal – was not said before a meal but after it, that way you know what you're saying thank you for. But meals are not an individual event. In first century Galilee and Judea, it's not that You Are What You Eat, but You Are Who You Eat With. And throughout Luke's Gospel, Jesus is eating with all kinds of different people: he eats with Pharisees, with his disciples, with Women, With Zaccheaus (a Roman collaborator) and with Sinners. Inviting them to a meal is a deeply inclusive practice, for many of those whose daily experience was one of exclusion.

Secondly, yes the second dimension of the great feast of the Kingdom – is the straightforward attempt to meet physical, bodily needs. This is something that a leader in any society had to do. In any empire, the leader's role is to provide his people with food security. In ancient Greece, bakers were granted senior political positions in Athens, in Anglo Saxon English – the Lord was straightforwardly and literally a Loaf-giver – and in Rome, the emperor faced a constant struggle to make sure citizens were provided with bread. By speaking about the Kingdom of God as a great Feast – Jesus subverts the authority of the Empire.

Anyone telling angry peasants about a new Kingdom, is asking for trouble. In the Roman empire, to seek the Kingdom of God is to seek regime change. Not just any regime change – but Jesus seems to be promising a kingdom in which no one will go hungry. A kingdom of radical social inclusion, where the King sits at the table with everyone else. This automatically displaces the Roman's treasured form of hierarchical government – where there are graded levels of inclusion towards the centre, and disposable nobodies like Galileans out there on the periphery. Jesus offers a radical alternative: Everyone is invited to feast in the Kingdom of God.

In today's reading, that 'everyone' includes a sinful woman. Jesus has been invited to the home of a religiously respectable Pharisee, and Katie Price turns up and starts giving Jesus what looks like an erotic display of affection. And Jesus just seems to ignore it and get on with the meal. Not surprisingly, the Pharisee is offended by Jesus's tolerance and so Jesus responds by telling a parable. The parable is about forgiveness – and whatever Christians have done with the concept of forgiveness, in this context it had little to do with clearing your moral slate before a mind-reading, judgemental psychotic divinity. Being a sinner meant being excluded from the benefits of Israel – and being forgiven meant being included as part of Israel.

She is forgiven, says Jesus, because of her faith. Again, faith is not the socially sub-normal ability to perform the mental gymnastics necessary to make yourself believe in the ridiculous. Faith means faithfulness, better translated Loyalty – loyalty to Israel's God, and loyalty to what Israel's God is doing here and now. And this sinful woman shows loyalty to God by showering affection upon Jesus. At this meal, Jesus forgives her – he radically includes her in the kingdom of God.

A meal is the most natural setting for this – but others present at the meal don't like it. Probably the best way to appreciate their reaction to what Jesus has done is to go on Youtube and see how Fox news reacted to news that Dan Price, a CEO from Seattle, gave himself a 90 percent wage cut in order to increase the salaries of his employees. A single criticism was simply not enough. No, a panel of sun-tanned, well-groomed, white-teethed experts berated this action with all the venom it's possible to squeeze through an artificial smile, poured scorn on this CEO – criticizing the morality of his attempt to be fair. This is precisely the reaction that Jesus faces time and time again through the Gospel of Luke.

In this story, the sinful woman is dismissed in peace, not because Jesus has helped her intestinal transit, not because she has enjoyed some yoghurt, not because feeling good comes from within. If anything, feeling good came from outside. From being accepted, included, welcomed, affirmed. The CEO who showed generosity to his employees, equally, did it to make himself happier – which always and invariably is rooted in the way we relate to others, the way we treat and are treated by others.

This is a theme we will see this dynamic repeated over and over again as the term progresses.

## On Giving: Why Give? How much? To whom?

Mr Ross Reason, Bursar

3rd May, 2015

Should we give to charity? If so, how much, and to whom? Today's New Testament reading offers answers to the last two of these three questions but is a little hazy on the first: Zacchaeus gave 50% of his wealth to the poor. But why did he do it? Was it out of a sense of guilt? After all, 2000 years ago, tax collectors were thought of in much the same way as bankers and hedge fund managers are today. Maybe it was in the hope of reward – the prospect of eternal salvation is a pretty motivating factor! And why 50%? Is that the hurdle rate for salvation or only for a rich man?

Ethical thinking offers two main approaches to the why – rule based reasoning and goal based reasoning. St Thomas Aquinas developed the rule based argument: for him whatever we have in “superabundance”, that is whatever is above and beyond what we need to satisfy the reasonable needs of ourselves and our dependants is owed of natural right to the poor. For a rich man, this is a far higher standard than Zacchaeus lived up to. Subsequent thinkers in this deontological tradition were not content to take their rule from scripture and advanced arguments from human-reasoned first principles. Kant proposed an ethical system based on what he called the categorical imperative: an action is right if the principle on which it is based should be a universal law. The Oxford moral philosopher Richard Hare built on this: if our actions are to be moral they must be “universalizable” – we must be prepared to prescribe them independently of the role that we occupy. I must consider strangers and enemies as well as friends. So, when I ask, should I give to, say, help someone who is starving, I should imagine that I don't know whether I am the one who might be starving or not and ask myself what would I want to happen in this situation? Clearly one would give.

For a consequentialist the right approach when asking why give is not an ex-ante rule but ex-post results. If you define happiness as the ultimate “good”, the maximisation of which is your goal, then give because it increases happiness, or in a Buddhist-equivalence, reduces suffering. But what weight to give various people's suffering? If you accept the premise that moral principles should be universalizable then the only answer is an equal weight. We should give an equal consideration to everyone's interests. This is a minimal principle of equality: it does not dictate equal treatment. Imagine that you come across 2 victims of a disaster, one with a crushed leg and one with a small gash. You only have 2 shots of morphine. An equal consideration of interests means that you give both to the person with the crushed leg: he will still be suffering far more after he has received the first shot of morphine than the person with the gash.

Now it gets uncomfortable. Last year 18 million people died from poverty-related diseases. 9 million of them were children. 1.4 billion people live on less than 80p a day. And that is not what they can buy in their countries with 80p, but what they could buy in ours.

But that's distressing so let's put that out of our minds for a minute: imagine you are on your way to an important meeting – it might be a job interview. You are dressed in your best clothes and are in a bit of a hurry. You notice a 3 year old drowning in a shallow ornamental pool. You are the only adult around who can save her, but, not wanting to be late, and not wanting to ruin your expensive clothes, you rush on by and the child dies. Most people would say that your action was morally repugnant. On the other hand most of us can save thousands of lives with very little sacrifice yet choose not to: no one thinks it is morally repugnant not to donate money to Unicef when that appeal envelope lands on your mat yet it is exactly the moral equivalent of letting the child in the pond die as soon as one accepts the principle of equal consideration of interests. The strength of a moral imperative does not diminish with distance.

Fleshing out this principle allows one to answer the second question of how much to give: an equal consideration of interests leads to the following premise: we ought to prevent what is bad when we can do so without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance. This innocuous sounding principle is remarkably stringent. It means that we cannot go on living our comfortable, luxurious lives, for to do so it is necessary to allow some to die whom we might have saved. Saving every life we could would mean cutting our standard of living to the bare essentials to keep us alive and in employment and also would mean taking the most highly paid job we could, even if that job was loathsome to us. Whilst this would be morally heroic most of us are not saints so perhaps, in the hope that it might motivate more people to give a higher proportion of their wealth and income, it is better to say we should give everything above what we need to lead a life that is consistent with maintaining our motivation to give. For most of us in the developed world that is far above the traditional 10% tithe and, indeed, the more that you earn or have, the more you should give. I very much doubt that Zacchaeus's 50% would be enough for a hedge fund manager and some have argued, not without reason, that the 99% of their wealth that Bill and Melinda Gates have given is still not enough relative to what remains. After all, amongst many other assets, they still own a house valued at \$150 million. But that is carping: if every one of the 1,000 or so billionaires who have, between them, over 4 trillion dollars was only a fraction as generous as the Gates, death by poverty could be eliminated tomorrow.

So to whom should you give? Andrew Carnegie who made the present-day equivalent of over \$300 billion dollars at the end of the nineteenth century and then retired to spend the last third of his life giving it away, and Bill Gates who is doing much the same thing with considerably less now, agreed that it is as important to whom you give to as how much. I would argue that it is hard to reduce suffering more than by preventing people, and particularly children, dying from poverty, but you might have your own views on what the best uses of your money might be. For instance, Carnegie gave his wealth away mainly to educational charities. To help you decide the World Health Organisation has developed a metric by which charitable impact can be assessed: it's a hard-hearted economist's cost-benefit analysis which ranks every intervention by how many years of disability adjusted life expectancy it adds – the best interventions, such as inoculating children against the parasitic worms that carry many tropical diseases, are up to 10,000 times more effective than the worst. The best-targeted interventions can save a life for a little over £100. What used to be “donate and hope that a dictator doesn't steal it” has become a science with organisations such as Give Well ranking charities by their effectiveness.

Buddha said “Set your heart on doing good. Do it over and over again, and you will be filled with joy.” Neuroscience agrees, measuring increases in activity in those areas of the brain associated with pleasure when subjects are asked to imagine giving money away anonymously. In a survey of 30,000 households those that gave money to charity were 43% more likely to say they were very happy than those that did not.

Life is more than consuming products and generating waste. Whilst I have been speaking, 250 children have died from preventable, poverty-related causes, something that, in this world of material affluence, is nothing short of a moral outrage. At the end of your life you will want to look back and be able to say that you've lived it well: part of that is doing your best to make the world a happier place. So, please give, give as much money and time to reduce suffering as you can afford, to whatever cause you are passionate about. It's the right thing to do and you'll be happier for it.

**Dr Colin Fairweather**

### **Sermon 3**

Proverbs 23:1-8

Luke 17:7-10

Back in the day, when I was at teacher training college, we got taught quite a lot about motivation. Some people, apparently, are internally motivated, which means they can do stuff just because they want to. Most of us, though, require external motivation - that is, some factor outside of ourselves encouraging us to act.

It's a basic human truth, I think, that external motivation that is positively expressed has far more power than anything else. So, if I wanted a student to complete a piece of work to their best of their ability, I might say something like, 'I know you can do this because I believe in you and I see great things in you.' Far less effective would be saying, 'If you don't do this, you're going to be in a lot of trouble.' I did actually know teachers that would routinely use negative reinforcement like this - they tended not to like children very much, which always made me wonder what they were doing in education in the first place.

It's part of our basic sense of justice that our efforts should be recognised and commended. So, if a student did complete a task for me and put their back into it, I might say, to motivate them further, 'You've done really well today, and I'm proud of you - keep this up and you'll go far.' Big smile on students' face - and hopefully the prospect of more good work to come.

What about if I had said, 'Yeah, you've done what I asked. What do you want, a medal?' Possibly a less successful motivational strategy. No one wants to hear that they've done nothing more nor less than fulfil their obligations; no one would be pleased to hear that they've simply carried out their duty. And yet weirdly enough, this is pretty much the attitude of the master in Luke's fable. Servants, Jesus seems to be saying, shouldn't expect praise for doing what they are supposed to be doing in the first place. 'Would the master thank the servant', Jesus asks, 'because he did what he was told to do?' The answer to this question is presumably 'no'. For their part, servants shouldn't expect to receive lavish praise for the routine fulfilment of daily tasks. 'You also', Jesus says, seeming to address the servants directly, 'when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty."'

I remember - again from back in my teacher days - when there was a little film made by the college about the work of the cleaners and security staff. We all acknowledged the hard and valuable work these people did, and gave them a little round of applause for it at the end. I thought it was a great way of saying that we as an institution respected those whose jobs were less conspicuous or glamorous than the teachers. (In retrospect, maybe we were being a bit patronising, but I still think that's better than remaining aloof and disdainful.) When we filed out afterwards, I heard one teacher say ironically, 'Oh well done cleaners, for doing the job that you are paid to do' - the implication being that no one should be applauded for fulfilling the basic conditions of their job description. I remember thinking at the time that this was a horribly mean-spirited attitude, and yet, the point of this particular parable seems to agree much more with that hard-nosed, unimpressed attitude than with my fluffy inclusive one. So what's going on here?

This is an unloved parable, and it tends to be overlooked. It's maybe because it's short - only four verses, in the version that we have of it. Having said that, there are several kingdom of heaven parables that are even shorter - the

mustard seed, the treasure in the field, the pearl of great price - and these seem to have caught people's imaginations much more. I think the real reason this parable is overlooked is because it's difficult - and also, that it seems to fly in the face of a lot of conventional wisdom about the rest of the book of Luke, and about Christianity more generally.

It's often said that the God doesn't honour the hierarchical distinctions of human society. God doesn't look upon appearances, but upon the heart, the Old Testament tells us - and it's a recurring theme in both the Old and the New Testaments that God cares for the poor, the lowly and the outcast. Indeed, some of the strongest words of judgment in the Old Testament are reserved for those who neglect the needs of the marginalised and the powerless. In the New Testament, of course, Jesus habitually hangs out with the despised sections of his own society - with tax collectors, with prostitutes, with all the people that any respectable member of 1st century Judea could happily write off as the scum of the earth. Luke particularly, it's often said, had a particular concern for the poor and the downtrodden - and a wonderfully inclusive vision of the kingdom of God.

Look at the parable of the great feast in Luke 14. A king (no less) issues invitations to the great and the good to come to his feast. The great and the good all make their excuses - so the king invites instead the despised and the outcast - the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. The implication is that in the kingdom of God, our divisive ideas about people's social worth simply won't apply. What a gloriously radical vision this is! What generosity God has, and how narrow and blinkered our human perspectives seem in comparison!

In the parable of the unworthy servants, though, hierarchical distinctions are not swept to one side by God's gracious inclusivity - on the contrary, they are insisted upon. Any servants who think they can park up and share a nice meal with their master is evidently in the wrong parable. That's not what servants do. Servants prepare the meal for their master, and then, and only then, are they allowed to eat themselves. There's not one meal here, but two - the important person first, and the little guys afterwards.

So what is Jesus trying to say here? Is human hierarchy something that God does have respect for after all?

Well, it might be useful to think about what sort of people Jesus is making his point about. In the parable of the great feast, the focus is on the lower echelons of society - they shouldn't despair, Jesus seems to be saying, because God sees their worth, even if society in general doesn't. I think the parable of the unworthy servants is about the opposite end of the social spectrum - about those in the community who are prominent, the worthies, the religious and civic leaders, the great and the good, the lionised of Jesus' time. Should they be given special treatment in the kingdom of God? Do they have privileges that the rest of us don't have? Are they in an exclusive category of their own - are they special noteworthy individuals, who rise above the collective mediocrity and deserve especial honour? The answer supplied by this parable seems to be, emphatically, no.

Augustine came up with a wonderful apophthegm about the proper attitude to salvation that Christians should have. He was talking about the two thieves on the cross - at the end of the gospel of Luke - one of whom curses Jesus, and the other of whom is promised a place in paradise when he says to Jesus, 'remember me when you come into your kingdom.' Augustine wrote, 'Do not despair. One of the thieves was saved. Do not presume. One of the thieves was damned.' I think the parable of the unworthy servants concerns itself first and foremost with those who are damnably presumptuous - who think they have a special talent, or status, or privilege that distinguishes them from others. Actually, this isn't a parable about the cleaners and the site staff, to go back to my little anecdote of before. This is about people whose time in the spotlight has given them ideas above their station, and who seem to have



forgotten the fact that they are servants altogether. Indeed, simply by reminding such people that they are servants, Jesus is putting them firmly in their place.

Jesus is certainly speaking at the expense of individualistic attitudes. The appropriate response to the master's demands is 'We are unworthy servants' - service, in other words, is a collective endeavour, and anyone who claims especial distinction within that group identity is entirely wrong-headed. I said before that this parable seems to insist on hierarchical distinctions, but maybe in one significant way it doesn't - there is no head chef or manager among these servants - there is simply an undifferentiated 'we'.

Perhaps the point here is that when we do things as a group, it is the group that gives us power, not the individual effort we make within it, however splendid that might be. There's a warning here for the gifted and the talented, for those who are excellent - for any member of a group who thinks they should be accorded special privileges over and above that of standard group membership. It's actually a lesson that some of the disciples need to take to heart. Funnily enough, the story isn't in Luke, but in Mark, James and John, who obviously think they're something a bit special, ask Jesus if they can sit at his left and right hand side when He comes into His glory. Not surprisingly, the rest of the disciples are rather annoyed by this, and Jesus Himself stresses that the request reveals an attitude that's actually quite alien to discipleship. It's for the gentiles, Jesus says, to lord it over others - but Jesus' way, and the way for those who follow him, is to serve. 'The Son of Man did not come to be served', He says, 'but to serve'.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul's great image for the collective identity of the church is that of the body. While we all have our own distinctive contributions to make, nobody makes it in isolation from everybody else. Paul writes, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!'" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour.' In a world that's highly individualistic, there's something profoundly countercultural in this - that actually, the value of what we do emerges not from our own specific strengths and talents, but from our interactions and interrelations with each other. What the parable in Luke reminds us is that in relation to Jesus, we all actually have the same status - and when we start thinking that our power derives from anything else other than the common fact of our service and submission to Him, we end up being unwarrantably high-handed and arrogant.

So, one of the themes of this parable is the danger of thinking too highly of yourself. Another is taking God's graciousness for granted. God has made the first move by graciously creating us to serve Him; as servants, we are admitted into the household of God; and as servants, we have to respond to God's initiative by carrying out our tasks to the very utmost of our ability. Before we even start to serve, we are placed in a position of indebtedness. So can we ever pay that debt of grace off through our own hard work? Well, God's grace is infinite - so, logically, that means, no matter how virtuous or hardworking we are, we can never reach a point when we've paid God off for the great grace He has afforded us. We are always in a position of indebtedness - we never reach the point where we're doing God a favour, or we're doing more than we need to, or we're entitled to some additional reward. The point is, that God has done more for us than we can ever do for Him - so whatever we do, we're always in arrears, and we can never wipe the slate entirely clean. Repayment is our duty, and because repayment can never be made in full, neither can our duty be discharged in full. We can never go the extra mile, in relation to what God has done for us, because God has gone further for us than we can even begin to imagine. You might think you're great. Everyone else might think you're great, but if you are anything less than infinitely amazing, you have fallen infinitely short of God, and you are therefore unworthy.

Well, this all sounds rather grim and joyless. It sounds like the Christian life is a matter of endless toil, as we struggle on forever to pay off a debt that can never be repaid. Perhaps part of the problem is in the word 'duty' itself - it's an unsexy word - it suggests what we have to do, rather than what we want to do - it contains an idea of

compulsion, and a sense that there's something else that we would much rather be doing if we had any choice about it. Wordsworth, in his buttoned-up, dutiful days as Queen Victoria's poet laureate, called duty 'stern daughter of the voice of God' - and indeed, there is something unavoidably stern, not just about duty, but about this whole parable. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche offers a real voice of protest against the life-sapping demands of duty: 'What destroys a man more quickly,' he asks in *The Antichrist*, 'than to work, think, and feel without inner necessity, without any deep personal desire, without pleasure—as a mere automaton of “duty”?' That word 'automaton' is an interesting one - there's a sense here that duty makes us less than fully human, without that exercise of the free will that helps us to realise the authenticity of our being.

Maybe there is a more positive way of looking at duty though. Maybe God created us for service. Maybe service is integral to what a human being should be - and maybe therefore we experience the fullness of our humanity when we act to serve. The Anglican liturgy for Holy Communion talks about it being our 'duty and our joy' to offer thanksgiving to God - 'our duty and our joy' - this notion that what we have to do is also what makes us profoundly happy is a powerful corrective to the rather grumpy attitude to duty voiced by Nietzsche.

Jesus was the perfect human being, and he exercised His humanity in service. In the little story I mentioned before, Jesus insists that 'The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.' There's a paradox here - the more humbly we serve, we more fully and greatly we realise our true humanity.

There's actually something in the Robinsonian context that can help to illustrate this further, and it's the image that was handed to you when you came in. Of course, this is the stained glass window in the side chapel by John Piper. I was just sitting in there on Tuesday, praying before the choral evensong service and staring at it...and the more I looked at it, the more interesting things I saw in it. The question is, 'Where's Jesus?' - and this is a bit like a game of 'Where's Wally?', because He's actually rather hidden. Of course the infant Christ is in the top half, but where is the image of Christ in His adult ministry? Look at the bottom section. I think you've got Adam and Eve on the left hand side, then how many people sitting at a table? Twelve. The person on the extreme right seems to be obscured by a particularly dark piece of stained glass, and I guess that's Judas Iscariot. This is the last supper. But where is Jesus? In a central position, like He is in Leonardo Da Vinci's version? Well no. This is actually the version of the last supper we get in the gospel of John, where Jesus kicks off proceedings by washing His disciples' feet - so we find Jesus, if we look hard enough, under the table on the left hand side, doing the work that would normally be carried out by a servant. Can you see him bending down and getting stuck in? This is Jesus the servant king, not taking centre stage as we might expect, but self-effacingly attending on others and putting their needs above his own.

This willingness to serve isn't one of the unique things about Jesus - on the contrary, service is something that He invites us to imitate. Jesus says to His disciples 'You have called me "Teacher" and "Lord", and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.'

What's really striking here is the juxtaposition of words suggesting high status - 'Lord' and 'Teacher' - with the humble act of feetwashing. It certainly messed with the disciples' heads, and it has a power to mess with ours too. The fact is, a king in all his splendour and finery is actually a poor image of God - we come far closer to the image of God when we humble and empty ourselves for the service of others. Giving a sermon - doing the intercessions - well, that's possibly holy. But what's really holy is putting the hymn numbers up beforehand, and cleaning the wax drips off the candles with a knife in the vestry. No possibility of lording it over others there, or getting ideas above your station. God doesn't distinguish between His servants - and that means that the priest at the front is no more worthy in His eyes than someone who cleans the chapel afterwards, or carries the wine and the crips over to the auditorium lounge. We are all unworthy servants.

One of the most moving experiences I ever had in a church was at a meeting with the Bishop of Chelmsford. Now, as you can imagine, he's a really important guy, so everyone was tugging their forelock and being very deferential. At the end of the meeting, do you know what he did? He helped to stack the chairs away - it was a really powerful example of the servant-heart - all the more so because it was coming from someone who sat in the House of Lords and exercises this weirdly feudal authority over archdeacons, priests, and little ordinands like me.

At the end of next summer, hopefully, I'll be ordained, and I won't be a little ordinand any more. I'll be attached to a parish, I'll get to swan around with a dog collar on, and it'll be great. My job title, though, will be 'deacon' - coming from the Greek word diakonos, meaning 'servant'. Basically, I'll be an assistant to an incumbent priest - a holy dogsbody, if you like, who probably gets dumped with all the jobs that nobody else wants to do. So, after this year of being a deacon - being a baby vicar - I'll go through another ceremony called 'priesting', and that'll make me a proper grown-up vicar - so I can do grown-up things, like give Holy Communion, and speak God's absolution, and do all sorts of other things with the full authority of the church.

But - just because you are no longer called a deacon, doesn't mean you cease to be one, or that you can dispense with the often-mundane work of servant, diaconal ministry. If you ever lose sight of your servant heart - if you ever think, 'Well, I'll be a deacon for a year, but actually, my training and my knowledge leads me on to do more important things, like expounding the scriptures, or teaching, or representing the people in prayer to God' - then you will probably end up with a very skewed and a very distorted idea of what ministry is all about. Indeed, the word 'ministry' itself comes from the Latin ministerium, which means 'service' - a minister is a servant, and those who are maybe in the church, maybe in politics, who think being a minister ennobles and elevates them really need to think again.

So - we are servants. We are unworthy servants, because our diligence in service can never match God's graciousness in calling us. Does this mean we need to get down and hate ourselves? No. It means we have to acknowledge with astonished gratitude how generous God is - how infinitely kind and caring - and all in a way that we can never hope to be ourselves. When we recognise ourselves as unworthy, we become aware of the great distance between ourselves and God - one of the great comforts of the gospel, however, is that God has also worked to overcome that distance by revealing Himself to us in Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the servant both of God the Father and of us human beings. He works to reveal the Father's will, and to carry out the Father's great plans for us that He's had in store since the beginning. He also serves us - the human race - by dying on the cross, thereby taking upon Himself the judgment we would otherwise incur ourselves. Jesus is the worthy servant - the only one who is able to match the Father's perfect love and care with a perfect love and care of His own. If we serve alongside Jesus, He will make good our shortcomings, and our unworthiness to serve. Remember the point I was making earlier, about service being something we do collectively, and not as individuals? Well, if we serve humbly with Jesus - if Jesus is our fellow servant - then His worthiness is something that we all come to share, and we all have a stake in. Jesus' worthiness, in other words, becomes our own, because it is an aspect of our group identity before God. To insist on our own talent, skill, ability or power, and to think it gives us some special privilege, is not only a foolish presumption, but it also risks missing where true worthiness lies - in the perfect love, service and compassion of Christ. Amen.

**Rev Dr Simon Perry**

## **Feeding the Five Thousand**

The feeding of the five thousand is the best known of all the so-called miracles of Jesus. But it wasn't a miracle, because miracles weren't invented until the 17th Century. When today, we think of a miracle – we think about the laws of nature, and that miracles break the laws of nature. But do we still believe that if there are laws of nature, that we know what they are, or what they are based on, or how they work? Most scientific breakthroughs in recent generations suggest that as the range of our scientific sight broadens and deepens – we increasingly learn just how little we know about nature. And in fact, if you listen to cultural theorists, nature is just a made up category – and we cannot even say if it exists. So in the twenty first century, when nature and its laws seem to be in a state of disarray – we can't really say much with confidence about miracles. Only when you have completely and utterly understood everything there is to know about nature, can you claim that anything is supernatural.

In the first century, there were no laws of nature. And when something happened that was clearly not normal, something that seemed astonishing - a good bible thumping Jewish believer would simply modify their view of life the universe and everything on the basis of their experience. No. Whatever happened at the feeding of the five thousand, it was clearly witnessed by those who reported it as an astonishing event, that subverted their expectations about how the world worked. And that meant subverting an assumed notion of how political power might function.

And in order to get to grips with the context in which this event is reported, it is probably best to imagine yourself in Wales. Not just because of all the sheep references in that psalm. But because there are lots of similarities between Wales and Galilee where this event took place. Both countries regarded themselves as having been dominated by a hostile foreign force – The English in Wales, the Romans in Galilee. Both countries suffered from what can only be described as a dehumanising lack of vowels. (Anyone who's studied Hebrew is well aware of the non-existence of vowels, and anyone who's tried to follow signposts from Aberystwyth to Maencloghrog Trefeglwys will have seen more consonants than sheep, and fewer vowels than rugby pitches.) And most importantly, both countries are roughly the same size.

So if you can picture yourself in Wales, out on a hillside, wait for the rain to stop – and see five thousand men, not to mention the women and children. And present is God's own Messiah, the leader anointed by God to lead his people to freedom. Now, what is it that's preventing these thousands of people from having freedom already? Why, it's the Roman Empire. Now – in the whole of Israel / that is, about the whole of Wales – there is one Roman Legion, that is – somewhere in the region of five thousand soldiers. Most of them are billeted in Jerusalem or Cardiff, whereas you're miles away, in Galilee – or Llanelli. You have enough people on this hillside to bring the people to freedom, to initiate a military revolution – and there are lots of people in Galilee who really wanted this. This is the context in which the so called miracle takes place.

There is a profoundly anti imperial thread running through this incident. To get to grips with this – a little historical context may be useful. In Galilee there were two brand new Roman style cities, built by Herod Antipas to guarantee favour from imperial Rome.

One of those cities was less than an hour's walk from where Jesus grew up, and it's highly likely that as a builder both Jesus and his father worked on the construction of this new city. And every Roman city had a sacred geography. Not in the temple, but in the town squares, markets, were statues of Roman emperors and Roman gods. Now emperors from Augustus onwards had to prove their divine ancestry: proving that they were both descendants

of the god Mars and of the goddess Venus. If you're going to be a successful military victor, you need the blood of Mars in your veins. If you're going to maintain a successful economy, you need the blood of Venus. Venus is not simply about sex, but about economic allure, or in modern language, winning the hearts and minds of the populace.

The worship of Mars and Venus was widespread – and it is in every empire throughout history – right up to today. And by worship, I don't mean religious worship, which is another modern invention – worship does not mean that you bow to statues, or chant in Latin, or sacrifice animals, or waddle into a church to witness a guitar-playing nasal voiced worship leader faking a spiritual orgasm. No. Worship is simply the way that we consciously or subconsciously construct our lives around the stuff that is valuable to us. Worship of Mars and Venus happens at a much lower key, unacknowledged but deeply effective level.

Al-Quaida knew this well enough when targets they selected targets for the atrocities, they committed in 2001. Now - bearing in mind that the US spend as much on its military machine as the rest of the world put together - where is the god Mars more fully enshrined than in the Pentagon? Where is the goddess Venus more fully enshrined than in the Trade Towers? Why did this atrocity have such an impact on the world? It was not merely because of the 3000 needless deaths. – According to UNICEF, that many children alone die every two hours as a result of easily preventable causes. No – the depth of the impact of 9-11 is that it struck at the heart of an ideology that is consciously or otherwise enshrined in the heart of every super-power in history. It was certainly true in Jesus's day – and feeding the 5000 is a far more effective ideological assault on Mars and Venus.

So Jesus, as the Messiah (i.e. the political leader anointed to lead his people to freedom), has amassed a crowd of five thousand and does what the emperor of Rome spent his life struggling to do: he gives bread to his people. More significantly, he provides bread for those whose own bread has been taken by the empire. Jesus, whatever he intended, is effectively usurping the authority of Rome. And yet, he had issued no direct threat, and to prevent the crowds seeing him as any kind of military rebel leader (the texts tell us there were five thousand men, without reference to the women and children) he immediately disperses them. Nobody expects this: why? Because his actions look as though he is about to initiate a regime change – when John's gospel reports this incident, it says there and then the people tried to make him become king. It looks like an imperial claim because Jesus is attacking Mars and Venus.

Rome famously had the Bread Dole, to feed its hungry citizens from the bread baskets of the empire. Since Rome itself could not provide grain to meet the needs of its population, military expansion was a necessity. Jesus has sufficient numbers of seditious disciples with him, with no worries about rationing, able to sweep through the land to bring regime change. And Jesus just dismisses them. By refusing to use his power for military ends, by refusing to lead his crowd to expel the Romans from his homeland, Jesus explicitly rejects the military way of the god Mars.

Jesus also rejects the economic allure of the goddess Venus. The echoes of psalm 23, thou prepares a table for me in the sight of my enemies... The imagery of a Eucharistic feast, like the one we share this evening, offers a radically alternative set of economic priorities. Not one where disposable humans out there beyond the borders of the empire can be drained to feed the needs of the economic elite at the centre. The Eucharistic celebration unites the wealthiest and the poorest members of society. In Jesus's meal, the health of a community is measured by the welfare of its lowliest members – and it is to these folk that Jesus attends. It is the very opposite of the Venus ideology, and it is supposed to be what is demonstrated every time Christians celebrate Holy Communion.

Ultimately, whatever the nature of this event with 5000 – Jesus did not do it. No – he turned to his disciples and said, "You give them something to eat." Those are the words that ring through the celebration of Holy Communion –

at which we locate ourselves with those who do not have what they need to survive. Jesus says, You give them something to eat. When we pray for food to be given to those who hunger today, Jesus says, You give them something to eat. When the odds are stacked against us, when our actions look like a drop in the ocean, when we seem helpless to do anything about the incurable injustices of our world, Jesus says, You give them something to eat.

Intercession – Feeding the 5000

Lord, we worship you as the God who provides, and we live in a world where so many go without.

And we want to ask you why so many hungry people in our world harvest crops to feed people who already eat too much.

And we want to ask you why nearly 30, 000 children die needlessly every day, when we have the means to do something about it.

And we want to ask you why the debts of the poorest people in our world, who are not responsible for those debts, can never climb out of them, while the debts of the wealthy can be ignored.

And we don't want to hear the shallow claims that there is enough food to go around – but that we humans aren't sharing what you have given us. We want to know why, time and again, our systems of government and economics seem incapable of meeting basic human needs.

We think especially of the hundreds of migrants, trapped and diseased and starving are abandoned to their floating coffin, despite the world's attention.

We think of the 66 million children in the developing world who are hungry now, and do not know where their next meal will come from.

We think especially of the small children in our western world today, who have not yet learned to speak but who are starving and malnourished behind closed doors.

Show us what it means then, personally and politically, to hear the words – You give them something to eat.

Show us what it means, to pray give us this day our daily bread.

May our lives become living proof that you are the God who provides.