



There's nothing good about being hungry!

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Year B, Ordinary 18

Ephesians 4:7, 11-16; John 6:24-35

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I am with the crowd in this story the writer of John's gospel retells expanding on the gospel of Mark.

I am pretty crabby with people who try to 'spiritualise' the story and sanitise the context it speaks to.

I am aware how difficult it is for those of us with a surplus of food, and ready access to more, to really understand the horror of a constantly grumbling tummy, faintness and lethargy, headaches and children crying for food we cannot provide.

This is an experience so beyond me I don't really know how to describe the horror of what it must be like to be so desperately hungry day after day, to say nothing of watching children die malnourished and whimpering.

There are many places around the world today where this is a daily reality - the Sudan, Palestine, the Ukraine to name the obvious. And, here in Aotearoa NZ, land of plenty, there are families struggling with hunger and constant food insecurity.

In the face of such hunger and struggle for food what can it mean for Jesus to say "I am the bread of life". Where is the good news here?

You all know how important context is for me when I try to understand the readings set for us in the lectionary: the context of the writer and initial audience, and the various contexts of today in which we hear the readings.

John was writing for a people alienated from synagogue and homelands in the 90s CE. A people struggling on religious and secular grounds, having on the one hand identified as Christian-Jews hence pushed out of the synagogue, and likely landless due to the resettlement of Roman citizens and supporters on the best land.

John is drawing on a story told about Jesus that begins with the feeding of the crowd who gathered around him on the shores of the lake in - the feeding of the 5000.

Richard spoke about this last week.

Now the story continues with Jesus escaping the needy crowd and crossing the lake to Capernaum. We pick the story up today when Jesus challenges those who follow him across the lake. "Are you following me in the hope of another free meal?" Jesus might have asked.

We might ask "Why do we keep handing out food parcels? Why is this necessary today?"

Surely the deep meaning of this story is more than an encouragement to those of us with surplus food to continue to provide handouts to those without enough, important though food parcels are if you are hungry.

The challenge to the followers was rough. "Don't follow me for more food handouts." If we read between the lines and absorb the tone of Jesus' address, he could have been saying to them "Don't settle for less than sufficient to live with dignity!" Today I might want to say something like "Don't risk your future by expecting food parcels to keep coming." (Funding has recently been cut making this supply precarious) That is just to continue a dependency model: to continue food insecurity.... *In other words, this type of food provision can come to an end - it perishes!*

You need food security. John's Jesus puts it this way "Work for the food that endures for eternal life". In other words, work for the food that does not come to an end if the generosity of the providers-with-surplus dries up - don't settle for less than secure access to food.

And, the exchange continues, with Jesus suggesting that doing the work of God, such as demonstrated by himself on whom 'God has put his seal', his ownership-brand, is the way food for this age and the age to come can be secured.

The work of God is work that gives 'life to the world.' At its most basic, 'this is bread for the life of the world.' *And this requires agitation of the status quo, facing down the structures of inequity.*

John's audience would have understood the political inference in the highly symbolic images and terms woven into the story. They would have understood they had to stand together, to demand access to land upon which to grow food (probably even the return of ancestral land that had been alienated from them) - good food producing land not the infertile land not wanted by incoming Roman colonisers. Don't settle for less - don't work for food that perishes. John's Jesus says.

Does any of this sound familiar? It should!

It behooves us to hear the political inferences in this story about the provision of food as a human right, for without food there is no life! *Secure access to food that can be produced in this age, for immediate need, and for future generations, 'the age to come' is what we need.*

The 'age to come' or 'eternal life', which is another way to speak of 'the age to come', is an image John uses often. John uses the idea of 'eternal life'/the-age-to-come a lot. He is speaking of life transformed into life in a kingdom structured and organised for the well-being of all people, as it would be if God were organising it. All people would have access to sufficient of what is required for a dignified life.

In our nation today there are many who do not have the means to live a dignified life. Alienation from ancestral land, and from access to a fair share of the land's resources is- if I have ears to hear the challenge of the tangata whenua - a major cause of the food insecurity and social alienation we experience amongst tangata whenua today along with the concomitant loss of self-esteem and confidence which can limit access to health and educational resources. All compounding the alienation.

Today, in Western societies such as ours has become since the 1840s and the signing of te Tiriti o Waitangi, the wealth of nations is being accumulated by a smaller and smaller group of mega rich people and trickling down in an ever-reducing flow to those who no longer have access directly to food producing land, or to work that will ensure a regular share of that wealth. The richest 1% of NZrs own 25%. (1/4) of NZ financial assets.

Governments are the structural mediators of wealth distribution.

Governments are charged to be the protectors of the wellbeing of all the people of a nation, and to secure that wellbeing for future generations too. A major responsibility of governments is to distribute the wealth of a nations in such a way that all the people have access to sufficient for life. Jesus was all about this: both the challenge of his ministry while alive and the challenge of his story after death.

Sadly, since 1860, 20 years after the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi with its promises and guarantees, the majority of land under Māori stewardship has been alienated from them one way and another. At that time, they managed 80% and today only 6%.

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Today food sources that don't dry up, don't perish because there is no fertile land available on which to grow it, or an income with which to purchase it, is becoming harder for many to secure.

Our fertile food producing land needs to be protected from our financial-growth aspirations, and our access to a share of our nation's wealth also need to be planned for and protected.

An avenue that St Matthews has been engaged with that seeks to secure an adequate income that has made a significant difference to the life with dignity for thousands of people, is our support of the Living Wage campaign. This work continues. It is one way we can show our concern that people have enough to live. Another is for us to be upfront and unsettling wherever there are threats to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Anglican missionaries were there at the signing of the Treaty in 1840. Today as Anglicans we can support our church and its Bishops asking them to speak up and affirm the legal status of the Te Tiriti and the Waitangi Tribunal, and as Stuart Tiller put it, 'to seek redress of the many governmental decisions and actions which have breached to spirit and legal status of the treaty covenant.'

Another is our work to keep the critical issues of the climate crisis in the forefront of planners and government ministers. St Matthew-in-the-City has always stood for social justice. It has both spoken out and acted out wherever and whenever there have been threats to the wellbeing of the people. Today we add the wellbeing of Earth herself to the list.

Jesus said "I am the bread of life" 'Whoever comes to me will never be hungry. Follow me and work for the food that endures.'

Today we might interpret it saying "My way is the way food for the world can be secured. Follow my teaching, be courageous and take a stand for the age to come. This is the work of God, and this is the work you are called to."

1. Māori land loss, 1860-2000, URL:
<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/interactive/maori-land-1860-2000>, (Manatū Taonga — Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 21-Apr-2021