

Pentecost 11
3/8/2008

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 32:22-31
Ps 17
Romans 9:1-5
Matthew 14:13-21

The journey to the margins, a place of compassion and nourishment

Jesus withdrew across the water to a deserted place. He had just heard of the death of his cousin, John the Baptist. The last time the two were together, John Baptised Jesus in the Jordan, and he went into the wilderness. This time his journey was a response to the news of a banquet: a birthday party where a dancing girl delighted Herod's heart, and her mother took the opportunity to viciously settle a score with John the Baptist whose head was served on a plate. Jesus' journey to the margins took him away from brutal murder, manipulation, excess and indulgence. It is even possible that he saw in John's fate some sign of what would become of him if he continued to embody the love of God in the face of political and religious power.

On the edge of society Jesus was surrounded by a crowd, people who so hungered and thirsted for life they risked a long and possibly treacherous journey to be with him. We know what came next: a different kind of extravagance, a feast of life and healing and blessing and trust and wellbeing, and food with plenty to spare.

It is common to link this meal with the Eucharist, but like the Eucharist itself, it has several layers of meaning, which are all present at once. In our day we are inclined to think a thing means what it says. We look for the how of this miracle, and not being able to find it, dismiss the story. But the older traditions, in which the Bible stands, were less restricted. They lived with multi-valent meanings and, often to understand, we too have to be willing to hold several things together at once.

Is this meal Eucharistic? We'll come to that, but first some other things. The Last Supper is the foundation of the Eucharist and involves bread and cup. This feeding is prior to the Last Supper, and involves no cup, only bread and fish. Furthermore, there is no reference to Passover, Covenant or Sacrifice. The words of Institution, central to the Last Supper, are not mentioned. Furthermore, this story is one of six reports in the gospels of Jesus feeding large crowds, which makes it seem we are dealing with a specific genre. The number of times this feeding is mentioned means the action is significant. Jesus was known to be a feaster and a provider. He often enjoyed table fellowship with people, especially those who were disapproved of. He turned water into wine at a wedding and after the resurrection ate fish and bread with his disciples. The early Christians remembered this, and at their ordinary meals, broke bread in memory of him.

This story has a past reference. It relates directly to a meal referred to in 2 Kings 4:42 – 44, where a man brought the first fruits of his crop to the prophet Elisha, twenty loaves of barley and some fresh grain. Elisha told the man to serve it to a crowd of 100 people gathered there and when he protested there was not enough to go around,

Elisha said: “Thus says the Lord, they shall eat and have some left.” And they did. Matthew’s story draws on the tradition from Moses and the prophets, that knew the God of Israel as one who, when least expected, fed and nourished the people in dire circumstances. That Jesus operates in the same way as Moses and the prophets, tells us that, in him God’s steadfast love was at work: the ancient power to nourish and restore was abroad in the world.

This story has future reference to the Messianic Banquet. Matthew Jesus tells a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven, pictured as wedding banquet, given by a king for his son (Matt 22:1 – 10). And at another place Jesus said: “I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of heaven.” (Matt 8:11 -12) Isaiah envisioned that day when he says (25:6) “On this mountain the Lord will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well aged wines strained clear.” In the meal shared with Jesus in that deserted place, the people received a small piece of God’s great end time feast into their hands.

How then is the story of this feeding Eucharistic? In all the ways so far mentioned: in its past and future reference, and all that it tells us about who God is for us, in communion with Jesus. But whereas we tend to think of the origin of the Eucharist as lying in the Last Supper, the early church laid as much stress on Jesus’ eating with disciples, sinners and crowds of people in Galilee, and on the post resurrection stories. That is why, in this example, the story has been shaped by actions traditionally associated with the Eucharistic customs we now share. On a deserted hillside, with no hint of blood or covenant or sacrifice, Jesus “took” the bread, “blessed” it, “broke” it, and “gave” it to them. And they were fed, in the deepest sense of their being. They found compassion, trust, healing, and blessing in a place that otherwise promised danger and deprivation. And although we cannot explain how it happened, they also received the food they needed for the journey. Everything Matthew does here points us to Jesus, the one in whom all Messianic hopes are embodied and fulfilled. Somehow the crowd were able to see this, and risked that journey to a far off place to be there with him.

Near the end of Peter Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang* Ned Kelly, who was by this time greatly under pressure, received a telegram with news of the birth of his daughter in the United States. For his daughter’s future reference Ned wrote down what happened next. “My daughter ...you was born. You was in a foreign land but safe at your mother’s breast”... what a knees up followed... our hard won money flowed like wheat from a broken bag. Barefoot boys ran through the frost [and] a girl set off on a Timor pony to bring the word. The police were in all the hills and towns, but the country were not theirs they had not the least notion of the celebration which now spread like yellow gorse across the hills. Joe Byrne sang ...and his great baritone echoed ...across the paddocks... Steve danced a jig in the middle of the track he were nimble and pretty as a pony... These were your own people girl, the good people of Euroa and Benalla who came drifting down the track all morning, noon and night... did the bush telegraph alert them I do not know only that they came the men the women with babies at their breast shivering kiddies with cotton coats their eyes slitted against the wind... they was of that type THE BENALLA ENSIGN named the most frightful class of people they couldn’t afford to leave their cows and pigs but the done so because we was them and they was us... of true blood and beauty born.” (p.

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We are not comparing Jesus with Ned Kelly. The link is in the power that spontaneously drew the crowd to a far off place. It was the recognition that the power of life was at work for us. And even on the periphery it was of us and for us. Even there it continues to reach us: to conquer death with healing, to nourish us in times of deprivation, and lift us up to see where life breaks through. From now on the periphery can be the centre of life, no death or loss need restrict us, and we need not live in fear any more.

And there is one more thing. Like the first disciples who preferred that people go to the villages to look for themselves, we too shy clear of showing compassion. This sometimes happens because, we are not sure what we have in Jesus, and like them we feel we ourselves have little or nothing to offer. But as Jesus transforms the bread for the feast, so he transforms us, and he says to us: you feed them.

As long as there are people looking for the gifts Jesus offers he gives his disciples a role in their distribution - that's us! And we do it, not in our strength but his, confident that the nourishment he gives will never run out!