

**SERMON: "BUILDING A NEW COMMUNITY"**

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And when he had taken the five loaves and the two fishes, he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and brake the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before them, and the two fishes divided he among them all. And they did all eat, and were filled.

Prayer is a common theme throughout the Bible. That's not really surprising. But --- perhaps surprisingly - there is something else that is mentioned in the Bible more often than prayer is. Think for a moment: What is it that is mentioned in the Bible more often than prayer?

Any suggestions?

The answer is: Eating and drinking.

Jesus often made a point of welcoming people who were outcasts: he welcomed them, not by praying for them, or by offering to pray for them, or by telling them to pray - but by eating with them. Then, as now, the meal - the act of eating with another person - was a sign of acceptance. The shared meal was a common feature of the Jewish tradition.

It was a powerful part of the practical expression of Jesus' ministry. The final meal he shared with his twelve disciples -- the Last Supper -- became the basis for the Communion Service of the Christian Church. The shared meal was so typical of Jesus that, according to the story in Luke's Gospel, when he was raised from the dead, the disciples recognised him in the breaking of the bread.

The feeding of the five thousand was open to all of them. Jesus did not offer to feed only a select few of them. No one was excluded. Certainly, no one was excluded on the grounds of colour, or race, or religion, or social class, or level of wealth. He said simply: "Give ye them to eat."

And, of course, there was more than enough to go around, as there is more than enough to go around today, when there is enough for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed.

Sharing food together is a sign of hospitality. It is a very old tradition, demonstrated throughout the ages. It was demonstrated by Abraham, who entertained angels. It was demonstrated by the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, who urged the early Christians to open their homes:

Let brotherly love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

It was demonstrated by monasteries and convents who offered food and accommodation to passing travellers. It is demonstrated today by countless church members who offer a ministry of cake baking and meal invitations.

And, of course, it is not exclusively a Jewish or Christian tradition. It is demonstrated today, as it has been for centuries, by the other faith groups who provide food freely to all who come to them - Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Sikh, ...

This sort of hospitality is boundless; it is non-judgemental, and open to all.

The feeding of the five thousand, as recounted in Mark's Gospel, ends with a joyful sense of abundance. Not only did Jesus provide for all the people who were there - possibly well over five thousand, depending on how one interprets the reference to "five thousand men" - but even after everyone had eaten their fill, there were still twelve full baskets left over.

The idea, of generosity and sharing is, of course, a powerful idea, but so also is the theme of justice. In that desert place, two thousand years ago, there was more than enough to go around.

Today there is more than enough to go around, if it is shared with justice. There is enough for everyone's need, but not for everyone's greed.

What are the implications for us?

Famine has been a problem throughout the ages. It is sometimes regarded as an unfortunate but unavoidable fact of life.

The sociologist Amartya Sen argued that, certainly in recent times, the regions which were hit by famine were not in fact suffering from a shortage of food. Rather, they were suffering from a breakdown of systems. There had been a breakdown in the systems which enabled food to be distributed to the people. The systems had broken down because of war, or corruption, or political in-fighting, or economic "market forces" (ie greed). Those factors, rather than any actual shortage of food, were what meant that people were not fed.

We are challenged. We are challenged to examine the structures, to examine the political priorities, to examine the economic decisions, to examine the

market forces which mean that people are denied access to God's abundant creation, denied access to anything like a fair share of what are the basic necessities for all people - necessities like food, clean water, shelter.

For the poor, two thousand years ago, the Gospel came as good news because it meant inclusion in a new kind of community; it meant inclusion in a new inheritance; it meant a new hope for the future.

' We are challenged today because the churches and other faith groups are surrounded by, and made up of, such people. The challenge is to relate to one another in line with this gospel of welcome, this tradition of hospitality.

The spirit of the church or faith group should be a spirit of hospitality; the church should be a place where people feel "at home". Churches are part of their local communities, whether they are based in villages or suburbs or whether they are city-centre, and draw a gathered congregation from a much wider area.

As part of their local communities, churches need to be aware of and involved in the spiritual and the practical needs of their communities.

The members of any church congregation are challenged to ask themselves questions such as:

- How is hospitality practised here?
- How might a homeless person feel on walking in here?
- How do we extend hospitality beyond the walls of our building?
- How do we reach out into the community?
- How might we tackle the ways in which homeless people are excluded by our society?

As Unitarians we do not normally celebrate Holy Communion, in our weekly worship. For some of the major Christian Churches, the breaking of bread at

- Holy Communion is their foremost sign of hospitality. But it has not always been so, and is sometimes not so even today.

Menno Simons was the 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptist from whom present day Mennonites took their name. More than four hundred years ago, in words that challenge us today, he was scathing in his criticism of the churches whose notion of the

- Lord's Supper he believed excluded the poor:  
Shame on you for the easy-going gospel and barren bread-breaking, you who have in so many years been unable to effect enough with your gospel and sacraments so as to remove your needy and distressed members from the streets.

' Practical action - such as tackling injustice; tackling the need for adequate housing at affordable prices; practical action, together with the welcoming of people who daily experience isolation and rejection - can mean that our hospitality is genuine, that our breaking of bread is not barren and selfish, that the spirit that was in Jesus will be in our sharing, and that we can be among those who are working to build a new community:- a new community founded on equity, fairness, justice, openness, and compassion.

I want to finish with a slightly adapted "Prayer of Commitment" from the Worship leaflet prepared by the Catholic Housing Aid Society Education and the Churches National Housing Coalition for the 1998 celebration of Homelessness Sunday in England:

We affirm that we are all part of God's community on earth, and we commit ourselves to his purpose.

It is not true that people should be judged on their wealth, employment, or how they conform.

It is true that we are a wonderful, infinite, rich and beautiful community of God.

It is not true that homelessness is an inevitable consequence of economic progress.

It is true that by making people a priority we are holding onto a vision of something better.

It is not true that it is acceptable to exclude homeless people from our community.

It is true that our new community must be just and inclusive. We welcome housing developments which offer hope to homeless people.

It is not true that the church can exist in ignorance or isolation from the community in which it lives.

It is true that we are part of that community, belonging to God and to one another.

It is not true that concern for our community is a distortion from the messages of the Bible.

It is true that our God loves justice and as his people we must work for it with passion.

It is not true that we can do any of this without changing our lives.

It is true that as people of faith we are called to live a radical life, alongside people who are homeless, mocked or excluded.

Help us to seek your truth and to live our lives according to your word.

Amen.