

“God’s Politics”, a sermon based on Matthew 14:13-21 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on 2 August 2020.

Every week in gathered worship, we act out one of the greatest failings in our nation. Every week, we put food in the blue boxes at the back of the Church for the Presbyterian Support Food Bank. It is important we do so, yet ritual is a weekly judgement on our economy, a weekly call to the followers of Jesus to do something about how people are meant to share the fruit of the land. In that acted out indictment, we put that food alongside a table that proclaims a contrasting vision - an inclusive, just, equitable world in which there is enough food and drink for everyone.

The gospel today also presents a striking contrast. Our reading began “Now when Jesus heard this ... “. The “this” in the reading was the beheading of John the Baptist. Jesus had been a follower of John. John had baptised Jesus. They were cousins. John was a prophet and the ruler Herod did not like him because of his criticism of Herod’s relationship with his brother’s wife. Matthew takes us to Herod’s birthday party. At the party, in return for his brother’s wife’s daughter’s dancing, Herod promised her whatever she wanted. Prompted by her mother who did not like John’s criticism of the relationship, she said “Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.” And so it was. This great prophet of God, a person of faith and heritage and influence was tragically beheaded. Matthew gives us a picture of a terribly unjust and inhuman and cruel gathering of people to eat and drink.

So what a contrast the next verses represent. Women and children and 5000 men sit down on a grass hillside and every one of them receives food. But watch the progression here. The disciples were free-marketeers it seemed – so they said to Jesus “ ... send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” Let each person fend for themselves. Every person has the capacity to find their own food. And we know what happens to the children and women, the most vulnerable - they can try the food bank. But what does Jesus say in the face of such a philosophy? “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” And then the disciples offer the ideology of scarcity -

“We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” “See how little. We cannot share. There isn’t enough to go around so we need to keep this bread and fish for ourselves.”

“Bring them here to me”, Jesus says. Perhaps the most significant line in the passage. Bring your ideologies here. Bring your political inclinations here. My mother once said to my father, good-humouredly, that even if a dog stood for the particular party for which he always voted, he would vote for it. That’s not good enough for followers of Jesus. Our voting is always subject to the gospel. Jesus held the loaves before God, blessed them, broke them, and gave them to the disciples and they gave them to the crowds. That is a guide to our political decision-making about the economy, that there is enough for everyone and everyone should have enough. We are not to keep too much for ourselves.

Two starkly different pictures. An ostentatious indulgent self-centred birthday party at the centre of which stands the murder of a prophet. And children women and men on a grassy hillside with enough food for every one of them.

On the noticeboard outside the Knox Park is a quote from the General Secretary of the United Nations. This is what he said recently – “The pandemic “operates like an X-ray, revealing the fractures of the fragile skeleton of the societies we have built. It highlights misconceptions and lies everywhere: the lie that the free market can provide medical care to everyone, the fiction that unpaid personal care work is not work, the illusion that we live in a post-racist world, the myth that we are all in the same boat. We all float in the same sea, but some are on super yachts, while others are clinging to floating debris,”. He was recalling that 26 of the wealthiest people on the planet have as much wealth as half the world’s population. “We are at a turning point”

Indeed we are, as we were when the head of John the Baptist was served on a platter, as we were when that crowd sat on a grassy hillside.

Church bodies world-wide are working together with economists to develop a new global economic architecture. And there are some shifts here in New Zealand. There has been a dramatic increase in ethical

investing. We have been made aware of the working conditions of those who manufacture our clothes. Many people are asking for higher taxation to enable greater equity. Many Christians believe there has to be some kind of wealth tax to enable a greater equity between generations. The pandemic has highlighted inequalities we must address. New Zealand has an ethnic wealth gap. In 2015, Stats NZ found that the median Pākehā had \$114,000 in wealth – compared to \$12,000 for the median Pasifika, \$23,000 for the median Māori and \$32,000 for the median Asian. The wealth gap between the median Pākehā and Māori is \$91,000 and it is getting worse.

Of course economic wealth is not everything, and yet here is Max Rashbrooke whose work is in this area - “It’s very difficult to maintain all the other things you want to do and draw on the other sources of wealth if you don’t have economic wealth.” “Income is the present, and wealth is the future. You use income to pay your daily bills and get through the week. Wealth gives you security for planning for the future.” Important in an increasingly unpredictable world.

As we come to the election this year, we know New Zealand’s economic system needs turning towards equity. Herod’s birthday party with the head of John the Baptist on a platter or Jesus feeding thousands on a grassy hillside?

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