

**World Council of Churches**

**Week of Meetings**

**Sermon preached by**

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**15 October 2007**

**Text: “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” (John 6:5)**

**Theme: What’s in a Miracle? Feeding the Five Thousand.**

Is it true? How can this be? These are the most natural questions people ask when they hear of the miracle about feeding five thousand men – without counting women and children! – with five loaves of bread and two fish. But these are quite the wrong questions to ask. Miracles are not arguments or propositions to which there are ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers. The question we should be asking is, rather, what does this say? There are several learnings I would like us to reflect on.

In its very essence a miracle is a message; it is an illustration of a message that God chooses to communicate to us. A miracle is God’s extraordinary message in the midst of the ordinary. To understand a miracle, therefore, is to understand something of God. To see a miracle is to see something of God. In verse 14, we read: “**When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world’.**” That means their eyes were opened and they saw Jesus as he was: God’s message of love to the world. In Matthew’s text that we have just read, Jesus, in answer to John’s question, says: “go and tell him...”

There is always a temptation to spiritualize the story about the feeding of the crowd. But it is a story of actual food. Jesus feeds the hungry, not with metaphors, but with food; not with resolutions and commissions, but with so much bread and fish that there is an abundance left over.

The feeding of the five thousand is a miracle of **sharing** and of **caring** for each other. Seeing the contribution of the five loaves and two fish by the young boy, the community took out the food each of them were carrying. And a fiesta was prepared!

The disciples are surprised when Jesus so carelessly asked them to feed all the people – their first reaction is to ask Jesus to send the people home so that they could fend for themselves. Then they turn to the market – that seems to them the only solution. I detect a note of sarcasm in their voices when they suggest that perhaps Jesus is asking them to go out at this last minute and buy food for the 5000. The people are just a nuisance to them! Perhaps they thought that an act of charity may make the problem go away – Jesus and the people would leave them alone! Perhaps a poverty reduction strategy would help, or a technological fix.....anything but having to listen to the people, encouraging them to change their own condition, encouraging them to discover from within their own resources their own solutions.

But Jesus wants them to take an alternative way - he turns the situation into an opportunity for the people gathered. He ensures that all are fed from among their own resources. **Those who had more would have had to give more so that all could be fed.** Jesus encourages the community to reclaim what is rightfully theirs. He does not depend on the market!

Jesus gives them more than food, he teaches them the art of sharing. He teaches them how to be a **community of love**. This is implied by the way he asks them to sit down in groups – those who had some food with them and those who had no food at all had

to sit together. The haves and the have-nots sit together. The gospel writer tells us that Jesus then takes the bread and blesses it, breaks it and gives it to the disciples to distribute it to the people. It is amazing that in the midst of a simple event of sharing food, the author uses this sacramental language – much before the actual Christ-event, the Last Supper, is recorded. This act of Christ gives new meaning and significance to the sharing in the body and blood of Christ. Today in the context of an unjust and unequal world, in a world of continuing unacceptable levels of hunger, the sacraments symbolise a strong word of hope – **an alternative fiesta of God.**

And on the other side of the coin there are the grotesque levels of wealth – the sacraments here symbolise the gift of radical sharing – and not just a sharing of the surplus after all our own needs are met. Radical sharing and not just charitable acts either!

The eucharistic vision described in the watershed ecumenical document on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry prepared by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, includes the following text: “The eucharist embraces all aspects of life. It is a representative act of thanksgiving and offering on behalf of the whole world. The eucharistic celebration demands reconciliation and sharing among all those regarded as brothers and sisters in the one family of God and is a constant challenge in the search for appropriate relationship in social, economic and political life (see Matt 5:23f; I Cor.10:16f etc.). All kinds of injustice, racism, separation and lack of freedom are radically challenged when we share in the body and blood of Christ.” (Para 20, BEM Document).

Sharing is one of the age-old practices of the Christian community. Every day millions of Christians in Asia, Africa and Latin America share food, and in that way those who would otherwise go hungry are fed. Every year Christians in Europe and North America contribute money as an act of sharing with millions of hungry people in poor countries of the South, and even with hungry people in their own rich countries. All these acts interpret aright the meaning of the miracle of feeding the five thousand. When Jesus is present, things happen; extraordinary things happen. **It is not the will of God that people should go hungry.** The gospel is never offered as a substitute for the fundamental needs of human survival, for it is the will of God that those who hunger and thirst should be given food and drink and that they should be provided generously and without stint. By sharing what we have with those who do not have, even the **hidden hunger** will be eliminated.

Sisters and brothers, I hope this image will accompany us as we continue to reflect on the challenges we face as we deal with the levels of poverty and hunger in our world today. Will we be willing to share our loaves and fish, or will we like the disciples try to send the people away with small concessions for which the poor are expected to be grateful? All the resources we bring to the table from ecumenical history of our uncompromising commitment to justice, and all the marvellous resources that lie embedded in our own faith heritage including the basic understanding of God’s option for the poor, seems to be put to the test in our world today. But, I believe that we at the Ecumenical Centre, we in the ecumenical movement, we as Christians, really have no choice – **we are challenged to spread with courage and foolish hope the gospel promise that all the marginalised in the world.....right down to the poorest of the poor, are welcome at the fiesta of God.**

As I reflect on our text today here and this week when we focus on the theme of poverty, I am also reminded that Jesus makes it clear that **there is a real relationship between the hunger of the body and the hunger of the soul**. The spiritual and the physical are each part of the divine concern and the divine plan. Jesus started by feeding the people with the living word. In the WCC programmatic work we emphasize the need for integration and interaction of all that we do. We must extend this value to include an integration of the ecumenical vision and action in our relationships; to embody our values in our daily interaction and internal dealings with each other. We should try and put into practice what we say in one of the famous songs in ecumenical meetings: **Worship and work must be one**.

What about the hunger of the satisfied? The hunger of the young people in the rich countries and rich families? The dialogue I usually have with such young people continues to impact my reflections on spirituality. Their hunger for meaningful living impresses me so much that I make it a reference point during my travel in many parts of the world. My discussions with several groups of European youth who I meet here at the Ecumenical Centre or in their respective countries has led me to pose the question: **What about the needs of those who "hunger and thirst after righteousness"**? One of my favourite prayers at the table is Thuma Mina 136 or its other version in Agape 9: "Lord, ... give bread to all who are hungry, give hunger for justice to those with bread ..." The second part of the prayer applies to all of us in the Chapel this morning; we know our supper tonight is in the fridge or at the grocery store to pick up on the way home. But after supper, will you feel hunger for justice in this cruel and oppressive world? And what are we prepared to do about it?

As long as it is possible to define hunger in terms of the absence of loaves and fish, we can work, pray and fight to provide enough loaves and fish for those who need them; **but what happens when the satisfied are not satisfied with satisfaction?** The miracle of the feeding of the five thousand also means that God is willing to provide not only bread, but that God is willing to offer the bread of life as well, the food that does not perish but endures to eternal life. Once again, we learn that the fundamental lesson of hospitality is not simply in giving, but in receiving as well that which we most need to have. **Love**. Jesus offers not simply food to the hungry, but himself to us all. In the Holy Communion, Jesus gives himself, and this memorial that we make of his body and blood allows us to become a part of that message, a part of that miracle whereby we, with those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, may yet be filled.

Amen.