

Leicester Cathedral – Trinity 5

*Canon Foster*

There is often recalled amongst opera 'buffs' that famous performance of the celebrated opera 'Salome' by Richard Strauss. The opera tells the story of John the Baptist imprisoned and eventually beheaded.

In this particular performance, the serving wench brings on to stage the supposed head of the Baptist covered up with a white cloth. At a dramatic moment in the score, such as only Strauss could create, the towel is whipped away only to reveal... a plate of ham sandwiches!

Perfectly true, but which actually in its 'rerun' did little to lessen the real horror of what was supposed to be portrayed!

Perhaps we should skip this story and read the next one instead. In St Mark, it's a much happier story about Jesus feeding 5,000 hungry people. Isn't it strange? Herod's 'horrible banquet' runs right into the story where Jesus makes sure that *everyone* is fed. Remember, Mark is a very careful clever writer. He wants us to hear these two stories together. The feeding the 5,000. It's a story found in all four gospels.

As Mark tells the story, it's filled with oppositions and contrasts:

- Jesus withdrew to be alone ... *But a great crowd followed him*
- It was a deserted place ... *But it became an abundant place*
- The disciples said, "Send the people away." ... *Jesus said, "You give them something to eat."*
- We have only five loaves & two fish ... *Yet more than 5000 ate with 12 baskets left over*

Did you hear the oppositions?

Alone...*Crowd*

Deserted...*Filled*

Send them away...*Feed them*

Too little ...*More than enough*

But the greatest contrast of all is between Jesus' 'banquet of life' and Herod's 'banquet of death'. Mark has placed these two stories side by side. He wants us to see the stark contrasts between these two very different banquets. Hard as it is to listen, let's go back to Herod's story. This feast was not in a deserted place, but in a lavish palace. There wasn't a large crowd, but a select guest list of important officials. Herod's wife, Herodias, was there, even though she shouldn't have been. Herod, as you will recall had stolen her from his brother. John the Baptist had condemned this unlawful liaison, and for that John landed in prison.

Though Herod was a Jew, the empire had replaced the Torah, the Law for him. He tried not to think about it, especially at his own birthday dinner. But why did he give in to this terrible request? Wasn't it enough that John was in prison? Herod liked to listen to John, which was odd indeed for John preached repentance wherever he went. Was there something inside Herod that remembered God's word, some spark of God that drew him to John's teaching? But he had promised Herodias' daughter that he would give her anything she wanted. "Even to the half of my kingdom," he said. He never dreamt she would ask for John's head. He was grieved at her request--grieved because he feared the crowd beyond his palace, for they revered John as a prophet. Grieved also because he was still drawn to what John said. But his guests had heard his oath. How could he disappoint his guests? Who knows what the officers might tell someone higher up? So Herod gave the command, and soon the head of John the Baptist was brought out on a platter, as though it was the last course of the meal. This was a very different banquet. Not the abundance of Jesus' feast. Not twelve baskets of food left over, but a horrifying leftover: John the Baptist's head served on a platter.

Herod could have made a different choice, but the empire had replaced God in his life. Though he loved to listen to John the Baptist, he couldn't risk his own reputation to spare John's life. The empire shaped his values and his decisions. Feeding hungry crowds was not on Herod's agenda.

Is it possible to maintain an empire and feed people who are hungry? There seems to be always enough money for weapons, but never enough to feed those who are hungry. Into such a world as ours today, Jesus comes with an alternative vision. "The kingdom of God has come near you," he said. Over and over he taught about it, told parables about

it, and lived it wherever he went. Jesus brought his kingdom-vision to the crowds who interrupted his solitary time of prayer. When the hour grew late, the disciples said, "This is a deserted place...send the crowds away so that they may go into the village and buy food for themselves." Everything rational shouts, "Good idea!" Herod would have said, "Great idea!" Send them away. But Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

'But, Jesus, we can't. You have to understand. Hunger is a very complicated global problem. If we give money to poor countries, corrupt leaders divert donations for their own personal use. The needs are too immense--we don't know where to start. I don't have the time or the wisdom to figure out what to do. Even if I did, I'm only one person. I have only five loaves and two fish.'

Jesus knows we are perplexed, but my excuses, our excuses are no better than those of the disciples! Jesus knew long ago what economists and hunger activists tell us now: we have everything we need to end world hunger. Apparently it would take £13 billion a year. What I want you to know--no, that's not it--what *Jesus* wants us to know is we can do something. That's what Jesus understood when he refused to send the hungry crowd away. "You give them something to eat," he said. We can do something and we can begin today...

- Read these two stories in Mark 6 everyday this week. Then ask yourself what you can do to respond to Jesus' call: "You give them something to eat."
- Pray for our country and for our leaders. Pray that we will remember hungry people even in the midst of our own economic problems.
- Write a letter to your MP to make sure we're doing everything we can to support hunger relief programs.

Our lives are filled with choices. Herod chose loyalty to the empire, not to any kingdom values for the good of humanity. He presided over a banquet of death. Jesus called his disciples to make a choice: "You give them something to eat." They could have said "no" for they had only five loaves and two fish--just enough to feed themselves. But Jesus called them beyond themselves. They did have something. You have something. And so do I. Jesus blesses and multiplies what we bring. When that happens, there will be a banquet of life for everyone.

