

Synod Sunday Sermon

from Bishop Paul Smith, Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand for Lay Readers on Synod Sunday, February 9, 2023.

Text: Matthew 14:13-21

Gathered in the name of the Miracle Worker: Jesus Christ

We meet in the name of the worker of miracles – Jesus Christ our Lord.

Some have gathered in Melbourne at the Convention of General Synod – hoping for a miracle. Some gathered expecting a miracle. Some gathered figuring that only a miracle will help the Church!

Whatever you have brought in your heart, here to Church today, you are gathered by the one we know as miracle worker. The same Lord Jesus Christ provided a scripture reading to guide our people especially those who in the gathering we call “Convention of General Synod” in Melbourne these past days. He gave a scripture that keeps his people focused on God’s heart of compassion, the same heart that performs miracles for us. He has provided a scripture which invites us to repent of any mistrust of his good and gracious will for us; of those times when human reason schemes, to suspect that nothing can be done; or that there can be no future for us; or that even we should avoid issues of dispute or disagreement amongst God’s people; or that we need to tell God how mission should be done.

This scripture reminds us that we are gathered in the name of the worker of miracles – Jesus Christ our Lord.

This scripture that I am speaking of, is the reading that was set for the opening worship of the Convention of General Synod last Thursday: Matthew Chapter 14. This is the story of the feeding of the 5000 not counting women and children. You may not know that this is the only miracle story, apart from the resurrection, that is recorded for us in all four Gospels: Matthew Mark Luke and John.

So, there is certainly something good and helpful for us here; something to tune into; something to guide us as God’s people as we step forward in faith seeking God’s good and gracious will for his Church.

This story will prompt us to anticipate the hand of God working miracles far beyond anything we could ask or think of. Of course, this message is not just for the work of the Church for those gathered for the Convention

of General Synod, but for all of us in our walk by faith in the name of Jesus.

The context of this story is important. By the end of the previous chapter, Matthew 13, our Lord Jesus isn't going so well. His cousin has been brutally murdered by a King. John the Baptist has been executed by Herod and the scripture tells us that upon hearing this, our Lord Jesus has gone off to remote place, privately. But, as so often happens, the crowds have followed him, and as they come to him with their human suffering, we are told that Jesus had compassion on them.

Having heard this context, we arrive at this wonderful miracle of the feeding, but for this meditation, let us focus particularly on the dialogue here, between our Lord Jesus and the disciples.

Even though the name "disciple" means "learner", in this story, we begin to appreciate that the disciples reveal that they still have a lot to learn about faith in God and following where the Lord leads ... we all do.

The disciples begin with telling the Lord Jesus the obvious – as if he hadn't noticed what they have noticed. "This is a remote place" they tell him. Well, yes, it is a remote place. Remember it was the Lord Jesus who went there in the first place. "It is getting late!" they tell him. Well, yes, it is! You suppose that our Lord Jesus probably would have noticed the twilight.

The disciples are figuring, "How do we deal with all these crowds of people? 5000 not counting women and children!!" So what is the disciples' solution? They tell Jesus that he needs to send the people away – so they can get what they need to eat!!

This all sounds quite reasonable, although you can hear mistrust and criticism from the disciples. You can hear them accusing him. "Lord, do you really know what you are doing? It really is your fault after all, you are the one who led the people out here."

The disciples' solution to the problem, is get rid of the problem.

We know this response of human reason all too well. We figure that God needs our help to fix the problems we notice, supposing that God has messed up. Even at the dawn of time, in the garden, the man accuses God ... "It was the woman YOU gave to be with me."

The disciples' solution to the problem? Get rid of the problem. But it is the Lord's surprising response that is so very captivating here. He says to them, "They don't need to go away. You give them something to eat!"

Straightaway, you hear the human reason of the disciples bark back at Jesus, with the obvious rational assessment of the problem. “We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish”. Again, you can hear the subtext of criticism here. “Come on Lord. You made this problem. You can’t expect us to solve it. Be real. We barely have enough for ourselves!! – it would take a miracle to feed all these mouths – 5000 not counting women and children.”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we are gathered in the name of the worker of miracles – Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Lord ushers the disciples and the hungry people into his work of compassion. He directs the disciples to bring the bread. Then, as the traditional providing father at the dinner table, he prayerfully gives thanks, he breaks the bread then extends his hands through the hands of the disciples, to fully satisfy the needs of the crowd of 5000 not counting women and children.

And the disciples obey the Lord’s command. In the end, they actually do give the people something to eat, straight from the miracle working of the Lord himself.

And in case human reason hadn’t been put in its place sufficiently yet, the end result of this distribution is an additional 12 baskets full of leftovers. So, this is the story of extraordinary abundance and provision, with even more to give away.

Too often our human reason gets in the way of seeing God’s abundance for us. Moreover, human reason becomes so busy with its own figuring of things that we miss the heart of the matter, which is God’s heart of compassion for people; for us.

We often wonder where we are going as Church. The women and men of the Church regularly have difficult issues to talk about. When the Church gathers for a Convention there are always proposals to consider; for we have a mission to serve. This is not our Church. This is the Church of Jesus Christ; the worker of miracles, and we gather in his name; the name of the one who worked the miracle of abundance in the loaves and fishes.

The greatest abundance for us, is what was wrought through the death of Christ on the cross. Yet, our human reason doubts the adequacy of that. At the heart of our Lutheran witness is the central doctrine of justification; teaching the sufficiency of the work of the cross. On that first Good Friday, on Calvary’s cross outside of Jerusalem, Christ Jesus took upon

himself the sin of the world: your sin and my sin. On the cross he dies although he does not sin himself.

In this gracious act, he freely and graciously exchanges our sin with his righteousness. Nothing more to pay. "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling."

In my baptism into his death, I am raised with him to walk in newness of life, that I would have peace with God. We call this the great exchange: the good news that we know as the Gospel.

But human reason can't accept this, and so our reason supposes, "I must add to this. There must be some good work that I can do to tip the scales in my favour, although, the miracle work has pushed the scale all the way down for me already.

Dr Martin Luther described this great exchange as the first and chief article:

That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification ..., this must be believed and may not be obtained or grasped otherwise with any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us ... Nothing in this article can be conceded or given up.

When our Lutheran Church folk of Australia and New Zealand gathered for the first part of the 20th Convention of General Synod in October 2021, they had before them a scriptural promise to set their eyes on the good news of the grace-filled covenant that God makes with his people, to remember God's promise to abundantly provide for his people.

Isaiah 55 is a promise and a call to come, listen and live.

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

“An everlasting covenant – of steadfast love.” We are gathered in the name of the miracle worker - the compassionate Lord – who has made us his own in baptism.

As the baptized people of God, gathered as the Church of Jesus Christ, we listen for his voice

- to live with the ambiguities and the uncertainties of what it means to be human but walking by faith;
- to be ready to repent of the desire to give credence to human reason’s unquenching thirst to solve issues without trust in God’s compassionate miracle-working;
- to remind one another that we are gathered in the name of the miracle worker who does far more than we can ever ask or think of: Jesus Christ.

So, our Convention of General Synod 2023, began with the story of the loaves and fish. Matthew chapter 14.

This miracle of the loaves and fishes is not about the number 5000. The scripture even reminds us that this number is “not counting women and children”, so the number was much more than 5000.

Abundance is not always about quantity, though our preoccupation with prosperity and materialism means human reason is always counting and wanting more.

Rather, the miracle of the loaves and fishes is about the unending compassion of our God, which can never be quantified. The compassion of God was made sure for all time, in the work of the cross of Christ Jesus.

This is light of God shining in the darkness of human reason.

If you have ever been in a dark cave underground, you know what even a little light does to dispel the darkness. In the same way, we Lutherans speak of the proper distinction between law and gospel. By the way, we never ever mean “balance”. A “proper distinction” means even the smallest point of the Gospel stands out in contrast to the law. A drop of the Law is distinct from an ocean of the Gospel.

The compassion of God that is revealed to us in the work of the cross, is the light of the Gospel for darkened minds. Distinct. Abundant. Setting a bright path to follow.

So, the apostle Paul explained the way forward to the Ephesian Christians:

For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light— for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. (Ephesians 5)

So as God's people, living as children of the light, we pray, "Lord, show us what is good and right and true – what is pleasing you – for we gather in your name."

And the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.