

Reflection on Mark 6:35–44
Rev. Christine Gilbert for St. Andrew's Uniting Church

In her novel *Where the Fruit Falls*, Karna author Karen Wyld tells the story of Bethel and her twin daughters Maggie and Victoria as they travel across Australia in search of a place to call home. There is much hardship, injustice and loss in their story but a resilience keeps them together and carries them forward.

A tender conversation between mother Bethel and her daughters is a preface to one of the chapters in the book. It's like a songline that gifts Maggie and Victoria, and us as the readers, with insight and direction.

Cheeks flushed from helping Omer round up the goats, Maggie and Victoria ran over to join Bethel on the bench under the olive tree.

"Is that the pottery jar you broke yesterday?" asked Maggie.

Bethel nodded. "It made quite a noise, didn't it?"

Victoria asked, "Why are you filling it with dirt? Shouldn't you be fixing it with glue?"

Bethel pressed down on the dirt, packing it tighter. "Glue won't fix it. Not this time. This jar has been broken and patched up too many times."

Victoria said, "So what's the dirt for?"

Bethel made a small indent in the dirt and picked up a seedling. "When patching doesn't work, then a new way of looking at the problem is needed."

She planted the seedling in the pottery jar. "The top part is broken beyond fixing, but the base is still solid. If I water this young seedling, one day it will reward with flowers. I'll still remember the jar that once kept flour safe from mice, but I won't feel sad, as it's been reborn as a home for flowers."

Like Bethel's flour jar cum flower pot, the story of the feeding of the 5,000 helps the followers of Jesus imagine a new future. When Jesus steps ashore and encounters the crowd that has rushed ahead of him to this deserted place, we're told he has compassion for them because they are like sheep without a shepherd. They are wandering in the rubble and ashes of what was—their beloved city Jerusalem with its temple in ruins—and they have no clear vision yet for the way ahead.

In response, Jesus begins to teach them. He offers words of instruction, shedding light on the path ahead. Alongside this teaching, Jesus brings his words to life by feeding the people. It's as though he's saying, "You have heard my words, now watch my actions. More is being revealed."

And what is it that we see in the feeding of the 5,000? What more do we come to know about Jesus through this scene? What might be the implications for us, his disciples, as we seek to live and move in his Spirit in our time?

Well, with meal times around our house greatly simplified now that Sean and I are empty nesters, there was a flashback of anxiety in me when Jesus said to his disciples, "*You give them something to eat.*" Their bamboozled response is entirely reasonable, I think: *What? You want us to spend two-hundred days' of wages to buy bread for this crowd to eat?*

Whether real or imagined—such as the panic toilet paper buying that has been a feature of lockdowns—a sense of need and scarcity presses on us continually. We no sooner make a donation to a trusted agency when another request lands in our inbox. There is no end to the ways we can give of our time and resources. Which makes Jesus' satisfaction with a meagre five loaves and two fish that much more curious and remarkable. It is enough... and, as we discover at the end of the story, more than enough.

It is enough because Jesus does not give in a transactional, purely functional way. He does not dole out material goods alone that quickly expire and are used up. This kind of giving is *exhausting* as many of us are well aware. If this is all we are on about, eventually the cupboard of our heart becomes depleted, our souls become empty, if not resentful, and we have nothing of lasting value to offer.

This kind of giving also falls short of what is modelled for us by Jesus. What Jesus demonstrates here and in other places is a giving that is fulsome and wholistic. Mother Teresa once said, "The hunger for love is much more difficult to remove than the hunger for bread." So for Jesus, five loaves and two fish are enough because everything he offers is infused with the wellspring of divine love flowing within and beyond him. This love never ends and fills our deepest hunger.

Jesus orders the disciples to get the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. In the midst of the people's hunger, there is verdant space for nourishment, growth and community. At times, we may scan the landscape of our present circumstance and see only barrenness—nothing is happening, there is no consolation or joy. But like indigenous guides who know how to find food and water in the desert, the Spirit is able to lead us to places of hope and life.

In all times and places, there is a greening because God is in all times and places. There is nowhere that God is not.

Part of our calling as Christian community, then, is to companion one another in finding our way to the green grass. This hope is not simply optimism or the offering of Hallmark-type sayings that are usually just an attempt to allay our own discomfort. Rather, as Bethel explained to her daughters with the flower pot, finding verdant places means looking at things in a whole new way at times.

Gathered into community around Jesus, the crowd and the disciples watch as he blesses and breaks the bread. *Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'olam, hamotzi lechem, min ha aretz.* "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the Universe. Who has brought forth bread from the earth."

This is the blessing offered at the beginning of meals in Jewish homes of Jesus' day. In this gesture, the Gospel affirms Jesus as what is known as the bread breaker. He is the head of the new household that is emerging after his death and resurrection.

As this household takes on sacramental shape, the community will come to understand that Jesus not only gives bread *to* the people, *he gives of his very self*. Or as the Gospel of John proclaims a generation later, Jesus is the Bread of Life and whoever eats of this bread will never be hungry again.

Friends, we have everything we need to be God's love in this world—now and in the future. Much has come undone over these months. Some might say some things are broken beyond repair. The next few years will make clear what cannot simply be put together again with a little tape and glue. And some of that might be for the good! The foundation remains and God is always planting seeds of new life in willing soil.

What we offer may seem small and insignificant at times, especially in the face of the pressing needs around us. But just as the morsel of bread we receive in this sacrament is able to fill us with grace, infused with the love of Christ, who we are is always enough.