

Sermon on Mk 6,35-44

Jane Sautter, St. Augustine's Church, Wiesbaden, 07/02/2021

This Sunday we are invited to tune into the theme of this year's Kirchentag. In May the Ecumenical Kirchentag is going online. The motto this year is: Go and see. "Go and see" is taken from the reading we heard just now from Mark's gospel. An eye-opening story, woven by Mark into his gospel, so that we can see Jesus and our own situation in a new light. So let's go and see what Mark is showing us about Jesus – and about how his kingdom works – and about you and me.

Let's look at the context, and then let's delve into three aspects of the story itself. First, the wider context: In his gospel, Mark has a thing about meals. On the one hand, he shows us Jesus eating with people again and again. With his disciples, with the so-called "sinners and tax-collectors", the so-called feeding of the 5000 (today's reading), the feeding of the 4000, and the Last Supper... On the other hand, there are Jesus's critics. They criticize him for eating with the hoi polloi, for not maintaining social distinctions and boundaries. Their kind of meal is shown at a birthday party for Herod, where the social and religious elite clink glasses. [If you are interested, check out Mark 6, 21-29 not much before our reading.] - Why does Mark have this recurrent (you might say a little obsessive) interest in meals? He is making a point. Martin Ebner, a Catholic theologian, helped me to see that these meal-stories hang together, right the way up to and including the Last Supper that we commemorate when we celebrate Holy Communion: Through the meal-stories, Jesus is showing us a new way of being, with him and with other people. His meals reveal something crucial about how his kingdom works.

Before we jump into the story of the feeding of the 5,000, let's recap the immediate context: Jesus and his disciples have had an exhausting time ministering to people, with no time to eat. On their way to get some rest, in the middle of nowhere, they are found by a large crowd of people. Frankly, there seems to be no escape from the masses! Jesus sees their needs and teaches them. As the sun sets at the end of the day, everybody is really hungry. And here is where our astonishing story starts. To get at the heart of this meal, there are three key questions: (1) Who is invited? (2) How does it all work? and (3) What's the result? Let's take a look at each of these questions in turn.

The first issue is: Who is invited to this meal? Or, to put it differently: Who matters in God's kingdom? The answer is: Everybody. Literally everybody. Mark paints a picture of thousands: around 5,000 men; we need to add on all the women and children. And Mark is very clear: "all ate and were filled." Verse 42. All. Everybody. Think big. Radical inclusion. If you're there and you are hungry: *Bon appétit!* You are welcome. Join in. - Have you ever felt unworthy? Too stupid? Too full of doubts? Not the religious type? Nothing to show for yourself? All Mark can say is: Join the club. Go and see. Look at this story. And if you're hungry: take a seat. Dinner is served.

Now of course, if you think about it, this radical invitation comes with a snag. The down-side is this: If the invitation is accepted, you and I will be sitting with the hoi polloi at this dinner party. Everybody matters, and nobody is special. When Richard Branson founded his airline Virgin Atlantic, I gather he originally wanted to call the Economy Class "Riff-raff". Doesn't sound attractive, does it? Somebody talked him out of that name. But you get the idea. Riff-raff. The hoi polloi. Nothing distinguished. We can't earn special places, much as we might like to.

Everybody is welcome. There is a wonderful song which conveys the essence of this idea, if you ask me. It's a song that became a theme tune of the civil rights movement in the US. The song is called "People get ready". [Check it out online, if you like. My favourite version is sung by Eva Cassidy.] The refrain goes like this: "People get ready, there's a train a-coming. You don't need no baggage, you just get on board. You don't need no ticket, you just thank the Lord." That's right. No ticket necessary for this ride. That perfectly captures the first insight that Mark is showing us: For this meal-time with Jesus – no reservation necessary, no credit card, no VIP status required. You don't need no ticket, you just thank the Lord.

Everybody is welcome. Well, you might well ask – especially if you have a practical inclination - how on earth is that supposed to work in practice?! Good question. It is all very well to say everybody is welcome. But all these people are really hungry and there is not enough food, not enough to go round. Jesus says: Go and see what you can find - and pass it around. We could put the second insight from this meal-story under the heading "how it all works". Take a look with me at how the meal is served: I'm in verse 41 now. "Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and he blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all." Here's the dynamic: The disciples go and see what food they have. They bring Jesus five loaves of bread and two fish. He gives thanks to God, breaks them, sharing them out among the disciples. And they pass it on. The disciples, Jesus's apprentices, have a clear task: They check on what they have and bring it to Jesus. They receive it back from Jesus and serve the crowd. - They don't have to magic a solution. They just have to go with the divine

movement: Go and see – receive and share. In this crazy divine economy, there is enough, enough for the disciples, and enough for the whole unwieldy crowd.

Actually, that's not quite right, is it. There's more than enough for everybody. Mark drives his third insight home with full force: This is not your usual economy of scarcity, not what we are used to when we focus on finite supply. There is scarcity, all right. Think of it: Thousands of people on the one hand – and five loaves and two fish on the other. But the result of the Jesus-economy is mind-blowing: All ate and were filled. And afterwards “they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.” (Verse 43). The key word here is translated as “full”. Actually, in the Greek the word is plural: *πληρώματα* literally means “fullnesses”. How can you have more than fullness? According to Mark you can. You can have fullnesses: Amazing abundance, overflowing to all, more than enough. That's what God's kingdom is like, on earth as in heaven. Will you, will I go with the flow of God's kingdom, as we pray that it comes?

Everybody is welcome. An economy of amazing abundance. Would you like to be part of a dinner invitation like that? I know I would. How can you and I join in this divine economy? How can we apprentice ourselves to Jesus and learn about how God's kingdom works? Two simple ideas: Go and see. Receive and share. Go and see: Take a good look at what God has given you. You might think about money, relationships, health, time, talents. - Right now, I imagine at least some of you are thinking: Actually, I don't have much money. Or maybe your thought is: I'm extremely busy. Or you're convinced: I don't have any special talents. Well, Mark's story is inviting you and me to think again. 5 loaves and 2 fish. That's no great offering. Pretty paltry, right? And yet - a massive

crowd gets fed. Think again. Take a good look. See what Jesus blesses and gives back to you to share with others. You may be surprised at what you receive that you can share. Here are some ideas: A bit of money could contribute to a charity working among people in poverty, here in Germany or in a developing country. You could drop someone a line saying "I'm thinking of you". If you're not fond of putting pen to paper: How about ringing someone you haven't seen in a long time. That might brighten their day, especially if they are having to self-isolate because of covid. You could offer to cook a meal for frantic parents struggling to manage home office and home schooling for their children. You could offer to go for a walk with someone who lives on their own. You could ask someone in the congregation or in your neighborhood "Is there anything I could do for you?".

5 loaves and 2 fish. Go and see. Receive and share. When we apprentice ourselves to Jesus, we're not following a person who bosses us around. We are invited to join the meal, to go and see, to receive and share. Jesus himself models this divine movement. At the heart of our story there's a specific movement, if you look at what Jesus does: he takes the bread – looks to heaven – blesses – breaks – gives. Do the verbs take – bless – break – give remind you of something? It's a very similar movement to what we will hear later in preparing for the Eucharist, when Father Chris will pray with us: Jesus Christ **took** bread; and when he had **given thanks** to you, he **broke** it, and **gave** it to his disciples, and said, "Take, eat: This is my Body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me." The Lord's Table is part of Jesus's lavish economy of grace: All are welcome, as Martin Ebner reminds us, looking at Mark's gospel. A poignant reminder, as we look forward to the Ecumenical Kirchentag. Today, as we gather around the Lord's table, as we join with Jesus and with one another in spirit, even if we

can't all be at church at the moment: Let's remember this divine economy: Everybody is welcome. Go and see. Receive and share. Amazing abundance.