

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 20 September 2020

O God, our guide, set your path clearly before us and lead us to follow you willingly for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.

Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16

Today our focus is on the **faithfulness of God** through the readings in Exodus and Matthew.

1. Food and the faithfulness of God in Exodus

During the COVID 19 lock down, we have experienced that how fast the shelves of the supermarkets became empty. As if we were living in wartime, essential items such as food were limited to buy. Exodus 16 is describing a similar but more a serious situation. Israel people have to encounter such fear for the lack of food in the wilderness where there are no visible sources of life. The story of God's miraculous feeding of the people in the wilderness shows the faithfulness of God, who is zealous for the well-being of the people. It is the same God who promised to be with Moses and the people at the burning bush¹, who demonstrated God's awesome care at the Passover² and at the crossing of the sea³. Now God sends manna, Israel's daily bread, to preserve the people from starvation. The story begins with the grumbling of the people, which repeatedly happens throughout the exodus and wilderness wanderings.⁴ The appearance of the divine bread is aptly described by the puzzled Israelites' question, 'What is it?' (manna) which is explained by Moses: 'It is the bread that Yahweh has given you to eat'⁵ The food is a gracious rebuke to the shortsightedness of the people. Scholars have related the story the sending of the manna to the Lord's Supper, although there are differences. In both cases, people are in need of God's grace. In both cases, people fail to recognise the grace and the faithfulness of God through the food before them. In both cases, the food is present as a result of God's intervention in human life. In both cases, while it feeds a present hunger, it also fills a deeper need which transcends present appetites (14:19-31). God is faithful to keep the promised life sustainable even though we don't recognise it fully. We see a similar example in Matthew.

2. Food and the faithfulness of God in Matthew 20:1-16

Matthew, chapter 20 begins like this: "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard." The kingdom of heaven is compared to a person – landowner. The kingdom of heaven in person also actively goes out to hire labourers for his vineyard. Here we observe a few important things. First, the audience is primarily the disciples, not the crowds. Second, there are at least two sets of relationships – one is the relationship between the owner of the vineyard and the labourers who work all day. The other is the relationship between the owner and the labourers who are hired at the last minute. The event unfolds to an unexpected direction when the labourers who work the

¹ Exodus 3

² Exodus 12:1-14

³ Exodus 14:19-31

⁴ Exodus 14:11-12; 16:3

⁵ v. 15

entire day stand by and watch as the manager pay the other labours a full day's wages. The first group's anticipation of a bigger wage seems quite natural as they see the generosity shown to the others. When they receive 'only the agreed-upon' wages, understandably they grumble against the landowner.

We who observe this scene may feel sorry for the first group over the apparent unfairness of the owner. Imagine what would happen if the world really functioned this way! What if the 'equal pay for equal work' principle were not operative? Why, people would sleep late and come to the labour pool only in the late afternoon if they knew they would get paid for the whole day! The owner's action upsets the whole arrangement of societal order, by no means an evil arrangement since it institutionalises an important principle of justice.

Even so, if we put ourselves in the other group's shoes, the whole scene is seen quite differently. Had the first group been the recipients of the owner's gracious method of bookkeeping, they would also have been overjoyed. It plainly shows an offensive character of grace through which God faithfully keeps the promised life sustainable through the ways that the world cannot understand.

3. Food for the church in the faithfulness of God

In our story time about the selfish giant, the question was, 'what is the faithfulness of God in the story?' We see that the giant, together with his beautiful garden are not complete without children – the symbol of the love of God. When love leaves his garden, spring never comes back. As love is back, so do spring and the happiness of the giant. More importantly, the giant is invited to the garden of paradise where his life continues in the love of God. Indeed, God is faithful to grant us eternal life by offering Godself – Christ Jesus to be the food of life. We – the church as the body of Christ is feeding the world with the food for the eternal life by letting them know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom God has sent. For us, it is true food and salvation,⁶ and this faith journey continues. Amen.

⁶ John 17:3, And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent; John 4:32 But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about,"