

Sermon for 2nd August 2026, Year A, Pentecost 10, Proper 13

Preached at St John's Baillieston

Isaiah 55:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21 (Feeding of the five thousand)

Sermon

At first glance, our readings today from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah and from the Gospel of Matthew are both focussed on God offering people free food and drink.

“Ho!” says Isaiah. “Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy, and eat!”

This rather archaic word “Ho!” is said by scholars to be the sort of call a stallholder at a middle eastern bazaar might cry out to attract attention to his wares. An English equivalent might be something like “Roll up! Roll up! Get yer free food and drink here!”

There’s always a catch though, whenever anything is offered for free. And the same is true here. The book of Isaiah is trying to make a deeper point, and the free food is just the headline to grab your attention. These days, modern advertisers do the same thing: “Free smartphone for the over-60s – just sign up to our life insurance plan!”

The next thing to realise about this passage from chapter 55 of Isaiah, is that it’s not actually written by Isaiah – not the original Isaiah in any case. The original Isaiah, the prophet the book is named after, lived in the 8th century BC, when the big threat to the people of Judah based in Jerusalem was the invasion of the Assyrian empire from the north. This was halted by a miraculous lifting of the siege of Jerusalem in 701BC.

But the later chapters of Isaiah were written in a completely different context, a couple of hundred years later, while the people of Judah were living in exile, having been conquered by the Babylonians from the east, in the 6th century BC.

Only a minority of the Jews were taken into exile – perhaps a quarter of them – but these were the wealthy, the aristocrats, and the intelligentsia of Jerusalem, and they were the ones who kept writing about God and trying to understand why God had allowed Jerusalem to be destroyed.

But enough of the history lesson! The point here is that the person writing as ‘Isaiah’ at this time is speaking to people who have probably done quite well for themselves in Babylon, in material terms. But they were also beginning to realise that material wealth, social class and good education was not all there was, that true fulfilment came from something else, a relationship with their God, whom they had largely forgotten, or who they assumed had forgotten them!

And so, the writer of this passage, whoever they were, started to speak from God’s perspective to those caught up in the wealthy consumerism of their day. ‘Are you able to buy what you need in Babylon? Well, good for you, but God can give you everything you need without you having to do work you hate, that brings you no satisfaction or meaning.’

This is something I can certainly identify with. When I was working for investment banks and hedge funds in London, I was earning a very substantial salary, and the work was intellectually interesting, even if ultimately quite socially meaningless. But when someone asked what I did for a living, I always replied that my job was to make rich people richer, and so it was. Nothing I did had any social good, beyond perhaps the income tax I was paying being used to support our welfare system and the NHS.

I remember getting into a conversation with a young woman going home on a train, who was working hard for a London-based charity, and she tried to

persuade me to pack in my pointless banking job and come and do something more worthwhile instead, that had a direct positive impact on people's lives. It took a while, but that encounter started a process that several years later led to me giving up my career in analysing markets to instead, eventually, become a novice nun, and then a priest.

Although I didn't read this Isaiah passage at the time, I'd clearly taken to heart God's message within it: "Why do you labour for that which does not satisfy? Come to me, and listen, so that you may live."

Babylon was a consumerist culture, built on empire, just like ours, and God's message is the same to us as to them. Give up your desire for expensive and unnecessary toys that you have to waste half your life working for, and focus instead on the free gifts that God is offering, which nourish not only the body but also the mind and soul.

Even as Jesus was feeding the five thousand, several hundred years after Babylon was overthrown and replaced by the Greeks and then the Romans, he was still preaching this same message. Yes, God will provide free food, but real satisfaction and transformation come from listening to God, being with God, and experiencing the love of God. As Jesus himself said, 'Your heavenly Father knows that you need food, drink, and clothing, but strive first for the kingdom of God, and all these things will be given to you as well.'

When I saw that today we would be hearing this passage from Isaiah, I initially thought that I might be talking about food banks and food pantries that offer free food to our local communities. Isaiah chapter fifty-five verse one could be their motto: "Ho! You that have no money, come, buy, and eat!" But that's not quite the point. This passage isn't speaking to those who use food banks, but to the wealthy, the ones who believe that life is all about getting the most stuff. God wants to remind them, and us, that the gift on offer is not the delicious food, but the possibility of eating and drinking with the Lord, who is the source of all life

and delight. And the only quality needed to join this banquet is a passionate yearning to be part of it.

Our Isaiah passage finishes with a reminder to the Jewish exiles of their special calling as God's chosen people. Their role, now long forgotten, was to be a blessing to those around them, an example for all to emulate and aspire to. This was always the central part of God's calling: follow my instructions and you'll not only have a life of fulfilment, love, and blessing, but you'll also attract and inspire everyone around you to turn to the way of love as well. It was the original calling for the Israelite 'Chosen People,' and now we who are called Christians have inherited this calling as well.

So, if we've learned one thing from our faith and our experience of life, it should be that it's not wealth and comfort, or lack of it, that make us attractive, but the quality of our relationships, and our love for one another, and our humility in recognising that we flourish only when we seek the presence of God and listen to him, deeply, together.