

A service of celebration to mark the retirement of Professor Dr Cornelia Füllkrug-Weitzel on 29th May 2021, and subsequent words of greeting

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Farewell sermon on the Gospel according to John, chapter 6, verses 2-14
Rev. C. Füllkrug-Weitzel, 29th May 2021

“A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up he saw a large crowd coming toward him.”

The people of Israel are in despair: we are probably talking about the years 66-70 AD. In the Jewish war between the occupying power, Rome, and the people of Israel, the cards are stacked against them. Its autonomous political existence is under threat, and the war has brought famine upon them. In this desperate situation a man appears, who raises the people to new life. There are some among them that take this as a sign that he is the Messiah, the saviour of Israel, sent by God! The account tells us that, *“the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near”*: they are all remembering the exodus from bondage in Egypt to a better world without oppression and hunger. Jesus is pointing the way towards a new beginning: a different kind of world is possible! It has already begun! Large numbers of people are following Jesus – hungry for further signs of hope. They literally besiege him: none of them go home to eat or sleep. Jesus lets them have their way. He knows that their hunger is craving more than just food. If not less. And he knows what has to be done: satisfy all hunger! And he also knows how to do this.

But do the disciples also know? Jesus puts them to the test, asking Philip, *“Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?”* He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.” Philip sticks to the facts: like a good project manager working for an aid organisation, he assesses the project’s prospect of success. And he states, matter-of-factly, that with the resources available, it is simply impossible to feed five thousand people. Unfortunately, under the given circumstances, the “project goal” cannot be achieved. And, therefore, the number of ‘beneficiaries’ will have to be adjusted to match the resources available. The horde of people must be sent home hungry and, effectively, allow Jesus’ followers – the helpers themselves – to fill their stomachs. These things happen.

Alternatively, if Philip were a populist politician, he would maybe say: we don’t have enough for everyone! Sorry, we have nothing to give away! With the limited resources at our disposal, we can’t possibly feed all the hungry mouths of those who simply come running to us, shouting ‘Jesus, Jesus’, or ‘Merkel, Merkel’. And we are certainly not some kind of ‘social welfare office for the world’ – as a former German development politician put it – responsible for all the starving people throughout the world. Really! That’s something you can surely work out for yourself! The facts are there for all to see! This is what we call political realism. Anything else would be naïve!

So, Philip didn't really get it after all....

“One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ‘There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?’” At least Andrew notices that the people, themselves, have something to offer. That everyone has something to give – even the smallest ‘have-nots’, such as this child. The conquerors of the world and its markets have long since ‘discovered’ the peoples and rich resources of the New World to be a source for their own prosperity: cheap labour, minerals, natural resources, mines, waters rich in fish, land for export production and biofuels – with still much more to be extracted and turned to profit! Global value chains are based on the resources of poor countries – something from which we all constantly benefit.

It is more unusual that someone like Andrew, who simply wants to satisfy the hungry, asks the people: do you have anything yourselves? He recognizes and respects their own potential. Not something that all ‘hunger fighters’ would consider doing. He is aware that even the economically weakest members of society have something to give. And, just like us, they are capable of helping

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solve problems among their own people and at a global level. All God's children have gifts. We are all reliant on sharing – including us. We only have to remember the story of Brot für die Welt (Bread for the World): founded to receive help from the global ecumenical movement, we became donors at a relatively late stage. We should not pride ourselves on our own resources. Or assume that the poor are incapable of taking their own survival in hand. They are not objects of help. But agents of change in their own right – each of them in their own context and, together, globally.

Andrew's research among the people revealed: five loaves and two fish! And he, too, is now starting to assess the prospects of sharing being successful – in purely economic terms. *“But what are they among so many people?”* There are too many mouths in this world for such little food! There is not enough for everyone! Such a shame, Andrew, you started so well. But now you are being somewhat short-sighted: by blindly following the thought patterns of the prevailing power and property structures, you, like Philip, will also be incapable of grasping what is really happening when the Messiah comes. And you, too, will not be a bearer of hope for those, for whom, apparently, there is simply not enough.

It is not a question of whether the disciples or the people have enough to feed all. But, first and foremost, of the fact that God does not tolerate poverty, hunger and injustice among his people. And certainly not when they oppress others. That is why he gave Israel laws to regularly recalibrate the social and economic balance. The marginalised and oppressed should always be able to get back on their feet again. And that is why God, again and again, sends leaders, prophets, and liberators to his people. They are meant to secure the fundamental rights of the poor and defend the autonomy of Israel, whenever its kings fail to do so. And that is why now, when the existence of his people is under threat, the Messiah will bring about what the political and religious leaders of Israel have hitherto been unable to achieve: enforce the right to life for all! And this means establishing different priorities and another kind of world order.

That is why, on this evening, Jesus is fully aware that the basic needs of those present must be satisfied. Hungry people cannot simply be sent away. This is the prerequisite and basis for everything else. But it is not yet what the people tirelessly following Jesus are seeking in him. And not everything he has to give. If the prevailing conditions were the limits of the kingdom to which the Messiah opens the doors, and were also the limits of what believers may expect – then the proverbial thousands would be left with nothing to expect or, at best, deprivation and suffering, not only on this particular evening but in general. In which case, if they were lucky, they could maybe hope to find a soup kitchen or a food package from an aid organisation. But no reversal of the wrong ways and means of production, consumption and governance that create and stabilise conditions of never-ending shortages, hunger and oppression.

But the people of Israel know from the Torah and the Prophets that when the Messiah comes, a new age will dawn. Then, with us, God will create a new life-empowering order, in which no one goes empty-handed, everyone has enough and shares heaven on earth! The people on the hill hunger for signs that Jesus is, indeed, this Messiah. They want, at last, to be rid of their crippling hopelessness.

What does Jesus do? He lets the tired masses set up camp. Camps, like those the exhausted people of Israel once set up in the desert. The question, common to both, is quoted a few verses later from Psalm 78,24: *“Can God prepare a table in the desert?”* A question that worries millions of people in so many countries today: victims of corrupt, life-destroying regimes that, under the cover of the pandemic, are brutally pressing ahead with a neoliberal agenda at the cost of the environment, the poor and minorities, instead of protecting their people.

For example, Brazilian theologians, in the face of widespread deaths and mass murder at the hands of the Bolsonaro regime in their country, have taken a stand alongside civil society and formulated their despair in an international appeal for help: *“We witness in horror the systemic extermination of our population, mainly the poor, quilomboas and indigenous people. The genocidal government of*

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Bolsonaro is not only a threat to Brazil but to all humanity." If Bolsonaro can trample all over the right to life of humankind and nature without response or, even, any kind of intervention from the international community, then the desert has won and all that remains is despair. "We are living under dark times, when the worst people lost their fear, and the best people lost their hope!" This sentence by Hannah Arendt from other dark times stands above this text like a statement of fact. As it could also stand above texts from India.

Does our life have any kind of prospect in the midst of such extreme hostility to life? Is there any hope? To this question, they expect answers from the global ecumenical movement.

And, on this evening at the Sea of Galilee, Jesus answers this question.

And how does he answer it? He takes what little the people have left, gives thanks to God and shares it! Five loaves of bread and two fish – the limited resources of the poor: they play a key role in God's transformative action. God gives them dignity and strength. Nothing is too little, if people, in the firm hope of being satisfied by God, are prepared, themselves, to add value to it. If one allows them to do something with it, instead of taking it away from them for "global added value". When we all remember that resources to meet fundamental human needs do not belong to any one person but are a gift from God. And, therefore, common property, for the benefit of all.

This kind of remembering is prompted by thanksgiving; an outlook rooted in giving thanks. The grateful remembering of God's mercy frees the mind from calculation. It allows bread to become manna – bread from heaven: bread, every bite of which provides the certainty that a different world is possible, because God creates it – bread of hope! Bread that does not run out until all have had enough. All who camped around Jesus and all the people: 12 baskets left over for the 12 tribes of Israel.

Jesus encourages people to sit together in groups to eat. In a circle, where each can keep an eye on each other's needs. Where you can talk to each other. Where sharing even small amounts makes sense. Self-organisation in communities contributing to the survival economy.

Giving thanks to God for caring for us all, then bearing in mind the needs of others, especially the marginalised, and appreciating the resources and possible courses of action of all and sharing them with all – where this happens bread becomes heavenly and never runs out. It transforms us, brings us together and empowers us to transform our world together through it.

The miracle here is not an event. It is a sign of the entirely different reality, which God has opened up with Jesus the Messiah. It can be experienced, where people are not prepared to put up with the realities that mock the will of God, but, instead, accept these signs as guidelines for their life and work. Bread can bring heaven in its entirety to earth if we use it properly. And if we share the hope that the bread from heaven will transform the circumstances, which diminish or even destroy the life prospects of people and the environment and empowers us to take transformative action – the bread of new beginnings, a foretaste of the new age. This is the vision of the work of Brot für die Welt alongside the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation and Action of Churches Together. That is what we owe and can give to one another in the worldwide community, so that everyone can say again *"We are living in bright times, when the worst people lost their hope, and the best people lost their despair and fear!"* Many can give bread but sharing the power that comes from heaven – that is our Unique Selling Point.