

Sermon for Fourth Sunday in Lent 2020.

Jeremiah 31:1-6. Revelation 21:9-14. Psalm 122. John 6:1-15

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.

John 6:2 ‘And a multitude followed him, because they saw the signs which he did on those who were diseased.’

Apparently there is an Internet video in which two Australian women beat each other up in an argument about toilet paper. I didn't see it, but I did see a clip on the news of a Critical Care Nurse crying in her car about the selfishness of people who had stripped the shelves of the supermarket, to the detriment of her and others who would have to look after them when they are at their most vulnerable. There is an irony there; and many ethical questions. Is she more entitled to the food than they, if so, why? Do you remember ‘Balloon Debates’? Speakers had to argue their case against being personally ejected from the Balloon rather than the other occupants, so that the balloon could gain height and not kill them all by crashing. I recall the days when I was working in hospitals and returning from a domiciliary visit to go to my clinic. Unfortunately, there would be no parking spot. People had parked, then gone to wait outside my clinic door, but I couldn't get in to treat them! ‘I look down on him because he is lower class, and I look up to him because he is upper class’. The lower class person says: ‘I know my place.’ All this shows is that we are dependent on the behaviour of other people; and on their or our expectancies. Unless we are completely cut off from society, our behaviour is being observed and monitored. What do people assume or conclude about us? Do they have evidence to support their assumptions or conclusions?

We read in the Gospel portion from St John that a multitude followed Jesus because of the signs that he did on those who were diseased. People were watching Jesus' ministry of healing, and wanted to see it in action. Clearly this attracted great crowds. He must have been successful in healing people or they would not have bothered to seek him out. They had no Health Service, and access to a physician was costly and rare. But, Jesus gave them hope. Healing some of them was a ‘sign.’ What of?

The people who received a piece of bread and some fish concluded that the miracle of their feeding (5000) was a sign of ‘the prophet who is coming into the world’ (Jn 6:14). They did not fight each other to receive His hospitality; it was a gift of God's grace to them. When all that was

physically available to feed them all was a lad's picnic of five barley loaves and two fish, Jesus did not tell them all to go off somewhere to barter for food. There would not have been enough in the small villages to have catered for a sudden rush of people 'clearing the shelves'.

In our own situation in a modern world, we have been repeatedly told that there is enough food and other supplies for people to carry on as normal rather than to bulk-buy and disrupt the supply chain. It strikes me that something is radically different now than it was the ancient world. It is this: people are not looking for a *sign*. They are not looking for a *sign*, they are looking for an *entitlement*. Their eyes are fixed on commodities, on things, on services. Yes, 'things' (particularly food and medicines) are tangible sustainers of health. Without them we die. Thus, 'we' moderns expect to be provided with things and services to which we are entitled. The fact that humans in hospitals and factories have to work hard to produce these things doesn't enter our minds. We want the result of their labour but we don't want *them*.

So, in Jesus' day the 5000 looked for a sign, and they found grace. In our day we earnestly look for entitlement, and we fear not finding it. The focus for them was God manifested behind the sign. The focus for us is survival of the body, and luxury if we can get it.

Jesus' signs were often connected with healing, and He was concerned about the body, including hunger. But He was also 'the prophet who came into the world.' His ministry emanated from a source beyond the purely physical pre-possession with worldly life. His signs pointed beyond the mundane i.e. out of the world, back to their source, to God. Pre-possession with worldly life points only to things that vary from transient to worthless.

Brothers and Sisters, in our present crisis, *we* must be signs for other people. We are the ones who have glimpsed the reality of God's glory given to us in Christ. We are the ones who have started to enjoy the fruit of God's forgiveness in our lives, because we have our minds and hearts opened to receiving His pardon. We are the ones who can point others to the final supplier of grace. We can share our confidence with others, that whether we live or die, we know Jesus, His forgiveness and his love. We are entitled to nothing, but we are grateful receivers of His Grace.

Romans 14.8 (King James Version)

For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's.