

# Sharing in miracles: the feast of grace

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 28 July 2024

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Pentecost 10B

**John 6: 1-21; Contemporary Reading: *Logos* by Mary Oliver**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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I want to speak today about three things: about magical cats, about scarcity thinking and the famine of grace, and about sharing in miracles. First however a question: do you know the rousing 19th century hymn *'Alleluia! Sing to Jesus'*? The second verse, referring to the Ascension of Christ, includes lines which have always struck me: *'Alleluia! He is near us: faith believes, nor questions how.'* How do you respond to that? In my case, I have to confess that I have always tended to sing the last part not as *'faith believes, nor questions how'* but as *'faith believes and questions how.'* What do you think? In my view, how we respond helps determine whether we can overcome scarcity thinking and the famine of grace, and, instead, grow as magical cats, sharing in miracles...

*'Why worry about the loaves and fishes?' wrote Mary Oliver: 'Imagine him (Christ), speaking, and don't worry about reality... Accept the miracle. Accept, too, each spoken word/spoken with love.'*<sup>1</sup> With a poet's heart, she calls us into a faith response, which is more than rational. It is not however opposed to reason. Rather, like many other of her poems, Mary Oliver is employing reason in the deepest sense.

She is using words *'spoken with love'*, in order to enable us, like Jesus, to enter into life in all its fullness: thereby finding meaning with the whole of ourselves, and not simply managing life with our minds. For we are invited to bring the whole of ourselves to the story of the feeding of the five thousand: to imagine, to be enchanted, and to be transformed. The poor old Western mind, troubled by modernity's false illusions of scientific certainty protests. Yet, in doing so, no wonder it struggles to birth miracles of justice and joy.

Today's Gospel reading certainly cannot be avoided if we want to have 'good news' to share, and to help birth fresh miracles of justice and joy. For the feeding of the five thousand – and, that of course, is only the number of recorded men – not only appears in all four gospels, but Matthew and Mark also relate a story of how Jesus also fed four thousand others.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://charlottehutson.wordpress.com/2013/06/25/logos-a-poem-by-mary-oliver/>

Furthermore, in the next few weeks the common lectionary takes us through John's account and his lengthy '*bread of life*' discourse. In John it is also most evident that the feeding stories are intimately linked to the deep symbolism of the Jesus, and Christian, story. For, like the poet, this story invites us into profound and lively sacramental ways of knowing, being, and living, in the world. In other words, as Mary Oliver put it in another poem, we are called to be like 'wild geese': or, as we might also put it, like magical cats...

What do I mean by a magical cat? Well, the phrase is from one of my grandchildren who was here a couple of weeks ago and loved some of the songs we sang. Later in the day, she was particularly keen on singing a Taizé chant, which she sang like this: 'magical cat, magical cat, magical cat, anima mea, dominum', rather than '*magnificat*'. Was she wrong? Well, like the prosaic details of an impromptu outdoor banquet for thousands, it rather depends on your attitude.

If you are interested in merely controlling yourself and your world, and in seeking the illusion of prosaic certainty, you will certainly say she was wrong. If, however, you know, or are open to the possibility, that we and our world are far more than we seem, then you will want to join in the song.

If, like Mary Oliver, you are like the wild geese, you will give up the attempt to control your life and world. You will mix poetry with reason, love with life, and live, sacramentally, like a magical cat. Reflect upon it. If we share in '*magnificat*', are we not, in doing so, each making of our '*anima mea*' – your and my soul – a magnificent being: open to divine poetry, tapping into wonder, and magnifying love in our world?

'*Magnificat*', living like a magical cat – embodying divine poetry, manifesting wonder, magnifying love in our world - isn't this at the very heart of the life and teaching of Jesus? Surely this is key to the Gospel feeding of the masses, understood sacramentally. For the story, told by all the Gospel writers, symbolises so much of what Jesus is and does. Jesus, the magical cat, magnifies. Jesus magnifies, makes more, of lives, struggles, hopes, gifts, dreams, and possibilities. Jesus enlarges. Jesus lives wondrously, brings wonder, invites wonder. Jesus gives us what we need to live: our daily bread, true food, that which helps us flourish. Jesus invites us to feast in life.

Oh dear! Now we hit a problem for certain types of Christianity, and for certain types of understanding and controlling the world. For rather than seeking flourishing and feasting together in life, human beings are all too susceptible to scarcity thinking and to sharing the famine of grace. Scarcity thinking is sadly embedded in so much of our religious and political outlooks. It is represented, for example, in the assumption, in many religious quarters, that heaven, the realm of God, has a limited amount of room, reserved for those who behave according to supposedly God-given restrictions.

It is seen, in many political quarters, in the deeply embedded assumptions, that there is only so much to go around, whether in terms of property and money, rights, peace or justice. It is seen, for example, in the influential constricting idea that there is a limited pool of rights and sovereignty. So, it is assumed, if greater, or even some, rights and/or sovereignty are given to one group of people, others must suffer: men must suffer if women gain rights, white people if black people gain rights, straight people must suffer if queer people gain rights, traditionally dominant religious groups must suffer if minorities gain rights, and so on.

Contemporary liberation theologians, like Jarel Robinson-Brown, in his book *Black, Gay, British, Christian, Queer*, have rightly named this the 'famine of grace.' This is partly because - as his book title highlights - scarcity thinking betrays the deeply intersectional nature of human beings and human connections. For it is linked to limited and imperialising ideas of God, life, and religion: constructed, as they are, on rationalising unjust concepts and structures of supposed 'reality', and on reducing the possibilities of human expression and cooperation.

Surely this is the very opposite of the praxis of Jesus, seen in the feeding of the masses? Rather than limiting food to the few, all and sundry are included. Rather than living, and justifying famine, we have flourishing. Rather than scarcity, we have grace, in abundance.

Well may the poet say '*why worry about the loaves and the fishes?*'! Leave that to the religious and political rationalists, and to those who would deny the possibilities of feasting for the hungry and the outcast. Instead, as Mary Oliver encourages, share '*the felt ferocity*', and '*the felt necessity*' of Christ's love. '*Imagine him, speaking*', and, in the power of that love, '*wine expands*' and '*the fish explode into many*.' Isn't that what happens when love is felt, expressed, and shared? We stop rationalising suffering, detachment, loneliness, injustice, and the famine of grace. We stop reducing the possibilities of human life. We stop living with scarcity thinking. We magnify grace and we too share in miracles.

Scarcity thinking, and scarcity faith, clings to us. We find it in ourselves, and in our own families and communities, as well as in the wider world, and those who are ungracious and ungenerous to us and to others. For singing like 'magical cats' is one thing. Living as magical cats is another. That is why today's readings are so vital, and those of John's 'Bread of Life' discourse to come.

For they are an invitation into grace, which is about sharing the feast of love with everyone, not hoarding and inflicting the famine of grace on one another. Happily, we will share an intentional 'season of gratefulness' in the next few weeks as a way of strengthening ourselves as magical cats, magnifying divine love, the bread of life, and sharing in its miracles. In the meantime, may we be freshly drawn into the wonder of the miracle of life, into God's extraordinary generosity, and the transformative possibilities open to us.

As we have also heard Mark's story of Jesus walking on the water this morning, let me in addition share a story one of my favourite bishops used to tell against himself. For David Jenkins, when Bishop of Durham, used to be under fire for his sacramental, rather than strictly literal, interpretation of miracles. For he wasn't interested in what he called 'a laser beam God', who would periodically 'intervene'. Rather, he profoundly believed, as I do, that the whole of reality was, and is, and will always be, full of the power of God's love, and its miraculous possibilities.

This, for me, is at the core of true Christian hope, justice, and joy. Many people do not understand that, and, whether religious or atheist inclined, they easily become distracted by incidentals, like how many loaves and fishes, and how they expand.

For that is, said Bishop David, how it would be if a leading Rabbi, a leading Imam, and I, the bishop, went out rowing to the middle of a lake and lost our oars. First the Rabbi would swim to the shore. Then the Imam would do the same. Then the bishop would be seen stepping out onto the water and walking to shore. The media would go on to have a field day. '*Bishop of Durham can't swim*': all the headlines would say!

So, in the face of today's Gospel text, of course, ask questions. Faith and doubt are not enemies but siblings together on the road. But let them not lead us into scarcity or the famine of grace. Let us not deny the miraculous, our sense of wonder, our magical cat.

The last verse of 'Alleluia! Sing to Jesus' begins like this: '*Alleluia! Bread of heaven, here on earth our food, our stay.*' For, like Ascension, the heart of faith is a giving away, a letting go into all, even into the cosmos.

It is a sharing in divine poetry, a magnifying of love, a maximising of gratitude and generosity, a living into possibilities of the feast of life.

So may it be for us all: in the name of Christ, the bread of life. Amen.