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Bread from Heaven (Exodus 16: 1-5, 11-21, 31-32)

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One of my earliest memories of going to church as a child was of a harvest festival service. We weren't regular attenders in those days, so it was an utterly unexpected delight on that sunny autumn morning, to see the whole front section of the church decked with flowers and fleeces and sheaves of wheat, baskets of pumpkins and marrows and fruit overflowing in front of the altar. For me, it was a felt experience of the totally satisfying abundance celebrated in our opening responses from Psalm 65, 'the year crowned with goodness, the tracks dripping with fatness, the valleys so thick with corn, they shout for joy and sing!' With this memory in mind, I've been looking forward very much to this, our first Benedictus Harvest Festival.

Yet at the same time – and maybe you've noticed this too – I've been conscious of a shadow hovering, a sense of poignancy at our rejoicing in earth's bounty in the context of climate change. Increasingly, we know, the earth's capacity to provide for us – food, water, shelter, home – is coming under strain. The delicate balance of nature's exchange is being overturned. The risk of harvests failing more regularly and more catastrophically grows – I know, even here, that many of our gardens have struggled this year with the extreme heat and the paucity of bees. So how can we celebrate this harvest whole-heartedly? Is our continuing this ancient festival in some way a symptom of bad faith, making 'nice' over the top of what's really going on – a full-blown ecological crisis and, just beneath the surface, our sorrow and fear and dismay?

Tonight's reading might seem to compound this problem – might seem a further expression of bad faith. As if the Bible is saying no matter how bad things get, God will provide. There will be a miracle. We'll be fed with bread from heaven, so we really don't

need to worry for the future – we just need to have faith. Well, I do think there's something true offered by this story about the relationship between faith and provision, but it needs some careful unpacking. So let's look more closely at the text.

During this season of Lent, at Benedictus, we've been reading the book of Exodus – the story of Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt and their being led through the desert to new life in the promised land. Tonight we encounter the Israelites about a month into their journey across the wilderness of Sinai. They've crossed the Reed Sea and left Egypt definitively behind. They've already had one scare, where they couldn't find water sweet enough to drink. And now they're hungry, and 'murmuring' against Moses and Aaron and (implicitly) God, terrified they've been brought out into the desert only to die. It's conventional in Exodus sermons to 'tut-tut' a bit about Israel's recurrent complaining during this phase of their journey, but why wouldn't they be scared? Celia Kemp has commented of her experience in the Australian desert: 'I have been in a desert without water. I did not worship. I became dizzy, then I worried, which escalated into panic shot through with anger and blame. Not entirely unlike the Israelites'. And she goes on, 'Why does the Bible make such a huge deal about trusting God to provide food and drink in the wilderness when, right now God clearly isn't because it isn't there?'¹

Well, as it happens at this critical point in *our* story, God does in fact 'rain down bread' and quails to feed the people. Significantly, though, what the story really focuses on are the instructions given to Israel about how they're to gather what's sent, and whether Israel will (as the God says) 'go by My teaching or not' (16: 5). And the instructions say, effectively: take only what each household needs, and don't try to hoard what you haven't used. The consequences of disobedience are immediate. Whatever they take – whether more or less than their allotted measurement – it turns into what each one 'must eat', what each one really needs. And then if anyone tries to

¹ Celia Kemp, *Into the Desert: 40 Day Bible Study* (Anglican Board of Mission, 2016), Day 23.

save today's allotted portion for tomorrow, the bread becomes inedible – it breeds worms and stinks.

Now, given that we live in an economic and social system *premised* on consuming more than we need and 'saving' not only for tomorrow but for thirty years hence, this is challenging stuff. And we could certainly draw a few lessons about the relationship between excessive consumption and our dire environmental straits. But I think this is not yet the theological heart of the story. The deeper point is to do with what our patterns of consumption reveal about our way of being, and how changing our patterns of consumption changes us and what's possible for us. So let me say a bit more about this.

The Israelites, the story makes clear, are afraid. They feel profoundly vulnerable and unsure how they'll be able to go on living. What does such existential fear do? It leads you to experience the world as a hostile place; it prompts you to look to secure yourself and your interests; it tends to contract your sense of the possible, and to close you in on yourself. This how we react when our survival is threatened – and it's not necessarily wrong. It's an instinct that (at least for a time) can serve us well. But it's not abundant life – and in the end, it causes damage to us and to others.

So what if God's insistence that the Israelites take no more than they need and do not store up for the future is about forming them in a different way of being in the face of fear and threat? What if this is about giving them some practice in letting go grasping and not holding on so tight? It seems to me that God is teaching the Israelites to trust in their own future and the journey they're on towards it; to trust they will receive what they need for today and find it enough. They're being taught to look to God, to live turned outward rather than inward, receptive to provision, to the life they are being given.

And I wonder, what this might suggest for us, as we face our own fears about the future of our planet and ourselves? What might it mean for us to live ‘turned outward rather than inward, receptive to provision’? I don’t think it means we just sit around waiting for God to rescue us. But it does suggest something about the way of being we’re called to. Recently, Tim Winton wrote an essay called ‘Despair is not an option when it comes to climate change’.² He meant we can’t afford to give up on the world, and that we must do all in our power to limit the destruction of eco-systems, and so on.

But there are two ways we can go about this work. We can do it in a frenzy, agitatedly, gripped by fear and anxiety, anger and blame, and holding everything tight. Or we can loosen our grip, we can open ourselves both to our pain and to the giving reality we name God. We can practice hospitality to grace, to possibility. Of course, it matters what we do – what we consume, what we leave for others. But I also believe it matters how we do it – and whether we’re willing to live (despite everything) trustingly, in a way that creates space for the Spirit of God to move within and among us. I think it might even make all the difference in the world.

In their wilderness journey, the people of Israel are being schooled in a pedagogy of trust, learning to entrust themselves wholly to the source of their life, the source of all life. We too are invited to learn this trust. One of the ways we can *practice* is to risk delight, to dare to celebrate what is given for this day: so today we give thanks for this harvest, this provision, this miracle of life.

² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 March 2017 [accessed: <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/despair-is-not-an-option-when-it-comes-to-climate-change-20170312-guwguk.html>].