

Matthew 14:13-21

## **The Alternative Party**

### **Death of a prophet**

There's any amount of horror movies these days. I'm not a fan and frankly I wouldn't miss them but seemingly it's big business and they attract high ratings and do well in app spin offs. Well, Herod's part for Herodias' daughter's birthday would sit quite comfortably with some of the gory films of today. The trouble was that this was for real. Out of pique or spite Herodias puts her daughter up to asking for the head of John the Baptist on a platter (because John had spoken out against her relationships). Herod had been rash in promising the girl anything she wanted. Rather than admitting his mistake, he saved face at the expense of John and had him beheaded and the head was duly brought in on a platter. Who in their right mind would want someone beheaded for their birthday? Who in their right mind would agree to do such a thing? Even by the dubious standards of the 1<sup>st</sup> century which could be brutal, this was a shocking occurrence and morality had hit a new low. Understandably, Jesus and his followers were dealt a cruel blow. I suspect Jesus had expected John to be executed. John himself sensed it was coming. Nevertheless, it was a dreadful deed and a worrying time. Even at this stage Jesus probably knew that ultimately his obedience to his heavenly Father's will would cost him his life, but this must have brought it home to him. His followers were likely shocked both at the manner of John's death and about the danger that it put them in. And so, it is probably no surprise that Jesus needed time to reflect and pray. We're told that he retired by boat to what was supposed to be a lonely place to be by himself. His popularity was undiminished and

crowds followed him around the shore so that he didn't get the peace and quiet he had hoped for.

### **An alternative “party”**

I had never thought of the feeding of the 5000 being a funeral tea! But I guess because we are apt to take different parables, stories and incidents involving Jesus as isolated and separate we're sometimes apt to miss how they fit together. People haven't been able to have funeral teas or face to face get together to support one another and talk about their memories of their loved one. It's been a big miss for some and one of the toughest restrictions that have been imposed. There should be some freeing up of that, no doubt with limitations and social distancing, going forward. Jesus gave his supporters and the crowds who had made an effort the benefit of his teaching. No doubt his words would have been reassuring, he was intent on continuing his Father's business and he wasn't going to allow ANYTHING to stand in his way, yet at the same time he'd have been honest enough not to pretend that all would be plain sailing. Doing the right thing, sticking to his plans for the kingdom of God would continue to attract opposition – and recent events had demonstrated that the results of that could be deadly – nevertheless, he would hold his course and he longed for others to join him. But in another sense the feeding of the 5000 was a memorial for John, hardly a funeral tea, but a family celebration that there was a future and a hope. In face of adversity, contrary to the gory, gluttonous self adulation of Herod's rock bottom immoral party, Jesus hosts a healthy, all age get together where families, young and old, could gather together in safety, where food was ample, if simple and the bread for the soul impeccable, where the BEST was given and brought out of people, in stark contrast to the debauchery and violence in the palace. An alternative party? Perhaps not the usual description, but more apt than you might think.

## **Lessons for today**

Churches these days, at least in much of the UK, are apt to get a name for being for old people. It's true that the proportion of folk on most membership lists is greater among the older age bands – and we need to face up to that without ignoring the needs of older generations. However, it is still the case that the Christian Church is one of the few organisations where it is possible to have meaningful all age interaction on a significant scale. It's not uniform across the board and the numbers involved may not yet be of the order some people may remember from their childhood with hundreds in the Sunday School, but all age, as opposed to just children's work is on the up, even in an increasingly secular Britain. Messy Church is not the only manifestation of it but there are thousands of them in Britain and still more across the world. Almost always there will a mixture of all age food, stories, activities and crafts in an informal, open and welcoming way, upholding the values of the kingdom as best they can, aimed at making Jesus approachable to a non Christian society. And do you know what? It works. People come and they come back. Parents come. Dad's come. I've no doubt we've lots to learn – and perhaps one of the biggest lessons church members who don't attend Messy is to stop asking when these folks are going to come to Church on a Sunday. I don't mean that unkindly, and of course, it would be great if more did come, but frankly we have to ask ourselves – what is the REAL aim of new expressions of Church like Messy and other out of the building missional outreach ventures? Is it to bump up the numbers on a Sunday morning or is it to lower the barriers so that folk can experience something of the love of Jesus in a non threatening environment (for them and their families) and to allow them to explore the Christian faith so that they might make a reasoned and genuine response? Both traditional Church and fresh expressions such as Messy and other intentional

attempts at OUTreach will have to work at discipleship and development – by which I mean helping people to grow and develop their faith, so that we don't stagnate, but grow and mature – BUT it means to me that creating space for a relaxed, informal and non- threatening environment for all ages is something that emulates something of the family and food ethos Jesus' adopted with the feeding of the multitude. There's always food and usually plenty of it, there's fun and a welcome – but all of it, not just the teaching/stories – all of it is immersed in the love of Jesus and all ages are invited to share in it together – and yes, it is often messy!

Jesus had a message to get across – and so do we. Folk like me tend to talk a lot – and my voice is paying the price of that just now – but while Jesus' message needs to be shared – it shouldn't just be words. Our lives are to bear out our words, something of Jesus' love needs to shine through in deeds. A congregation needs to reflect the attitudes of Jesus – your words and deeds as well as mine, will “attract or scare” to quote the hymn.

I remember being part of a congregational party on Hogmanay many years ago. It was in a parish that had a bit of reputation for social challenges. It was an all age party, there was plenty of food, no alcohol but plenty of soft drinks, good fun and lots of happy faces and smiles. I think there was a wee prayer at the end but it wasn't a “get them in so we can tell a Bible story” kind of meeting. And everybody didn't stay until the bells. One of the Dad's who hadn't anything to do with the Church came down to collect his wife and children. He worked at the pub. No late licences in those days. And he said to the minister, not me, though I was there – “great to see families enjoying themselves without getting drunk. I've just finished chucking folk out of the pub, well the worse for wear, and some throwing their weight about”. Of course, pubs

don't need to be like that but it was compliment – even if he might have assumed that folk at the Church wouldn't have had fun!

Being a friend of Jesus doesn't mean being condemned to a life of drudgery. It doesn't mean that we can't let our hair down and enjoy ourselves – we can have parties – well at least when we're sure the restrictions have been lifted. And perhaps we have some work to do to get the message across that faith does not need to mean “dull and boring”. We need to be more outward facing, more informal and open, ready to listen as well as talk, to hear what people are really thinking, what concerns them and what makes them tick; perhaps consider folk in their social context – as families, not just as individuals, certainly not just kids – but ultimately we have to facilitate people finding out about Jesus, being touched by his love and that will mean lowering the obstacles and ensuring that first of all we do no harm. There would have been some at the feeding of the 5000 whose hearts were heavy about John's demise, but no, I wouldn't think of it as a funeral tea. It was however, a launching pad for the next stage of Jesus' ministry – a ministry of outreach to families, to wider society, to all who might benefit from his healing, teaching and promise, including the poor, the hungry and the vulnerable. We would do well to take a leaf out of his book – and look to the power of his Spirit to equip us and support us in our share in Jesus' ministry.

May the Lord bless you. Amen.