

A morsel of bread

1 Kings 17:8-16; Luke 7:11-17

At the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland there are a number of events that stand out as being special. The opening ceremony with its fanfares and heralds and formality. Heart and Soul in Princes Street Gardens with thousands of people learning, laughing, sharing along the avenue at the various marquees and in worship throughout. On the closing day that moment when they read out the names of ministers, deacons and missionaries who have died in the last year. Two children reading the story of Ruth in Gaelic. Meeting the Archbishop of Canterbury. And the singing each morning – traditional, powerful, heartfelt.

On Monday morning at the Assembly we share the Lord's Supper. Around 1,000 people taking bread as it is passed along the rows of seats, and sharing wine from the silver common cups. It is one of the most moving events of the whole week, even when the hearing dog for a deaf minister fell asleep on my foot last year, and this year somebody fainting in the middle of a row and needing to be wheeled out.

One of my earliest memories of the General Assembly was as a child watching the communion service on television, back in the 1970s. I was mesmerised by the silence during the service, and fascinated by the rows of silver cups gleaming in the television lights, and fascinated how someone would know how many morsels of bread would serve so many people at one time. How could so little feed so many?

There is more than an echo of that in the story of the prophet Elijah. This man of God, driven out into the wilderness by the aggressive and neurotic King Ahab, and his vindictive and hard-hearted Queen, Jezebel, found himself in a drought-wracked land where water, and food, had vanished.

In this story, which has strong elements of a miracle parable, God directed the prophet to the little village of Zarephath. It's outside Israel, in dangerous territory. Then again, Elijah had spent ages in the wilderness and must have looked rough and wild and dangerous too. The widow

must have been terrified seeing him approach. But she stood her ground, and such is the powerful ancient tradition around hospitality that when Elijah asked for water, she gave what she had. When Elijah asked for food, not expecting her to have much, this poor widow woman tells him the truth, but gives to him the morsel of bread she thought would be the last meal she and her young son would have before they starved to death.

There are some people who would find it hard to share their last Rolo. But here, where a starving prophet comes out of the wilderness, and meets a nearly starving widow and her son, what little there is, is shared. And in this miracle parable, the act of generosity, the sharing of the morsel of bread, is met with the cornmeal not running out, and the oil needed for cooking replenishing until the drought was over.

I find this a hard story. If you were starving, if your child was starving, would **you** have been so generous, so sacrificial? Is this only a fancy story from the Bible written to make us feel guilty because we could never, would never, live up to this impossible ideal?

I remember a photograph of a year or so ago. A cameraman is following a story of drought and starvation in a part of Africa. Food is going to be shared with starving children, but the cameraman takes a photograph of one of those starving children who had just been given two lollipops. This tiny little black child, malnourished, probably never having had a sweet in his life, suddenly has two. Seeing the cameraman had none, the child holds out one of the lollipops to the cameraman, and the moment is captured. Breaks your heart. How could so little feed so many? Like a morsel of bread, shared by a widow.

I think of an old couple I visited in my last parish. They lived in a tiny two-room cottage that had been the old toll-house on the St Andrews road in Cupar. They had hardly two coins to rub together, but in their garden they grew vegetables to see them through the year. They had no freezer so they couldn't stash produce away. So passers-by found themselves being handed all sorts throughout the year. "We think we'll have enough, but you have this." Given to people who probably threw away more than this couple ever had. Breaks your heart. How could so little feed so many? Like a morsel of bread, shared by a widow.

Generosity is not confined to those in grinding poverty. There are many people in society at all levels that give hugely, and this is a wondrous thing to be applauded, encouraged and emulated. But when someone gives something from the very little that they have, the tariff of generosity is surely calibrated in a different way.

This story about Elijah and the widow makes us look at how even the little that people have can be shared, and then blessed, by a generous God. That morsel of bread the widow offered almost becomes sacramental in its gift of grace, and life, and love. Like Jesus, offering a morsel of bread to His disciples at the Last Supper, a symbol of a far greater gift lying behind it, so this morsel of bread offered by the widow is a symbol of how human beings, in the extremities of need, can still show kindness and generosity that might challenge us to re-evaluate not only what we give of ourselves: time, talents, or money; but how and why we give it. In that extremity of need, God met that old widow, and the prophet, and through the morsel of bread, brought blessing.

Rufus Watson loved this story. Rufus Watson, who lived to be ninety-nine years old, was born in Texas, the son of former slaves. He served his country in the military. He played sports in the Negro professional leagues. He made a little money in property. He witnessed lynchings and spent a lifetime wondering how people could commit such atrocities and still go to Church and call themselves Christian.

He found comfort in the story of Elijah and the widow. He said if his life was not proof enough, this story showed that God meets people at the bottom of the barrel. "That's where God meets us, at the bottom of the barrel. God meets us when we've gone so low that all we can do is look up."

If Rufus trusted God to meet him at life's low points; if Elijah trusted God to meet him at life's low points; if God met Elijah and the widow at the point where the grain, oil and rain were running out, maybe we are well advised to do the same. We can hold on to our questions for God about why such low points happen at all; but for Elijah and the widow, it was at that low

point that God met them both, through the faith of one and the generosity of the other, in a morsel of bread.ⁱ

Maybe you are at, or have been at, a low point in your life. Maybe there is someone you care about deeply who is at a low point. Maybe you look at the hunger of the world, or the cruelty inflicted on children, or the curse of cancer, or the breaking of a relationship, or the frustration of frailty and old age, or the numbing possibility of unemployment, or any other of the bad news stories beating down upon us. And may be, at such a low point, as you take the morsel of bread this Communion, you might find yourself reminded of the One Who gave it, so that we might not be starved of life or hope or love.

We share the little we have at this Communion meal to be reminded of the generous possibilities that lie behind it, where we might receive, and give, so much more of ourselves, to everyone who as a need, as we are able.

It's just a morsel of bread. How could so little feed so many? But it does, in the name of the Saviour Who lived for you, and died for you, and rose again for you, to offer hope. In the morsel of bread, taste and see that the Lord is good.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ H James Hopkins, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 3, p103