

Beyond imagination

The Ninth Sunday after Trinity (Year B) - 28.07.2024

2 Kings 4.42-end | Psalm 145.10-19 | Ephesians 3.14-end | John 6.1-21

Reading

6 After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. **2** A large crowd kept following him because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. **3** Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. **4** Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. **5** When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" **6** He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. **7** Philip answered him, "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." **8** One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, **9** "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" **10** Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place, so they sat down, about five thousand in all. **11** Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. **12** When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." **13** So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. **14** When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world." **15** *When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.* **16** When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, **17** got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. **18** The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. **19** When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. **20** But he said to them, "It is I; do not be

afraid.” **21** Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going. (John 6.1-21)

Prayer

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.**

Sermon

I. The future is always unpredictable in a way

Good Morning!

People have long been curious about what the future might look like. And I am no exception. In this aspect, science fiction has always piqued my interest. I was attracted by the Star Trek series, which is based on Gene Roddenberry's Starship Enterprise. Although it does not appear in any sequence, "Beam me up, Scotty!" is practically iconic.

The series created a whole universe in which humanity, motivated by scientific curiosity, explores the universe and discovers habitable planets. The series depicts a world in which humanity is driven by lofty moral principles, where tolerance, inquiry, and openness to various cultures are paramount. Problems and issues are best addressed using logic and factual arguments. War is not desirable in this ideal world. Sometimes defence is required.

It's almost the polar opposite of what we're experiencing right now. And there will likely never be another universe like Star Trek. Rather, the series projects answers for the present into a distant and idealised future.

Future pictures often reflect current aspirations. They are unlikely to be accurate projections of a real-world access point. They frequently express visions of the future using imagery from the present or past. As humans, we can make reasonable predictions about the future based on our current observations and empirical experiences. Science does

exactly that. Regardless of the scientific potential, the future is always unpredictable in some way. Knowledge is limited.

II. Human imagination as well as human knowledge are limited

The human imagination can create stories about things that do not exist in reality. We can create fascinating stories from distant universes. That, for example, acts as the foundation for literary and artistic works (such as Star Trek). But what happens when we approach the boundaries of our collective or individual imagination?

In some ways, we all confront similar challenges in our daily lives. Remember how hard it is to understand others. On the one hand, because we are all humans, we can generally understand what others are thinking or feeling. That is a remarkable ability. On the other hand, our guesses can sometimes be incorrect. Finally, there is still a barrier between us and others that is frequently difficult to overcome.

When people from different countries, cultures, and backgrounds join together, the task becomes significantly more difficult. Our diverse community at Christ Church is a great example of this. Other people's behaviours may appear weird to us because we are unable to distinguish them from our own ideas and feelings. As a result, our personal experiences can provide us with perception patterns that can lead to incorrect conclusions. Unfortunately, this can lead to miscommunication and, in some situations, disputes. Our personal experiences, thoughts, and knowledge all influence how we perceive the world. However, through confusion, irritation, and conflict, an opportunity occurs, and we likely learn that our thoughts, comprehension, and knowledge are limited. In the best-case scenario, we can start learning from it.

III. Trusting in Jesus and look beyond our imagination and current understanding

Our gospel for today describes a situation in which people excessively mistake an event due to their limited imagination and current understanding. Following the miraculous feeding of 5,000 people, the people who witnessed it wanted to make Jesus their king through force. Jesus walks away from the crowd, irritated.

But what's the confusion here? We need some more context for that. In ancient Rome, kings would strive to legitimise their power by offering food. Bread was frequently supplied to spectators at large games in Rome, as well as throughout the Roman Empire's provinces. The emperors attempted to influence the crowds in the Colosseum and maintain their power. The well-known Latin phrase "Panem et Circenses" (bread and games) expresses this truth. And remember that Judea was part of the Roman Empire in those days.

Against this cultural backdrop, people recognise that Jesus is unique through the miraculous feeding, but they do not understand the event's true significance. The people misread the feeding of the 5,000 as a solely humanitarian reaction to their immediate needs. Their political setting leads them to misinterpret Jesus as a worldly ruler.

But the Gospel of John invites the readers not to stand by their current understanding and superficial interpretation of food. Therefore, unlike the other gospels, John's gospel does not speak of miracles but of signs (σημεῖον/ semeion). "Semeion" or "sign" is an important and central theological term in the Gospel of John. The Gospel of John wishes the wonders not to be misinterpreted as spectacles. The phrase "signs" is used to signify that there is still a special meaning behind the events.

The description of seven signs takes up the whole first half of the Gospel of John. This means that 11–12 of John's 21 chapters are devoted to Jesus' signs.

The seven signs are:

1. Turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11),
2. Clearing the Temple Courts (John 2:13-25),
3. Healing an Official's Son (John 4:46-54),
4. Healing the sick at the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1-15),
5. Feeding the crowds (John 6:1-15),
6. Healing a man born blind (John 9), and
7. Raising Lazarus from the Dead (John 11)

And the Gospel of John tells us what the purpose of these signs is. There it says in chapter 20: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are

not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." (John 20.30-31)

The Feeding of the Crowds in particular portrays Jesus as the bread of life, providing eternal life to those who believe. He satisfies our deepest hunger: to be in communion with God.

That, by the way, is the mystery celebrated in every Eucharist. By trusting in Jesus, the Son of God, and sharing faithfully his body and blood, we already have a share in eternal life, and we are already part of God's future with us in the here and now, even if it is beyond our imagination and knowledge, and even if the barrier between God and us still exists.

IV. Trust and hope in God's future with us as a perspective in our peculiar situation

It's not easy to trust something that goes beyond our own imagination and understanding. And this is all the more difficult in our crisis-stricken world, where many people are worried about their future and the future of their children. People wonder if this world will still be worth living in 100 years. Trust and hope are what the Gospel of John offers you and me as a perspective in our peculiar situation as humans.

And that's what we're supposed to build our entire lives on. We are invited to believe that there is a future of God with us that is already accessible in and through Jesus. Even if we do not yet fully understand what that means for the present and the future. There's no need for anything else. What God did in and through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is so significant that everything else is unimportant or at least secondary.

V. Care for each other with love, learn from each other and strengthen each other

What could this mean for us as Christ Church in Vienna? Firstly, we are a community of people who are on the road. On the way it is important to care for each other with love, to learn from each other, and to strengthen each other. And we may be a source of hope for people and communities around our congregation in Vienna.

God has an important message in the present, marked by fear of the future. A message that should extend far beyond the borders of our community. Even we do not exactly know what our future will look like. (I am quite sure that it unfortunately doesn't look like Star Trek.) The message is our Christian hope for a future reconciled with God in Christ, which is already available through faith in Jesus.

And finally, we are a diverse community. That is our special strength and our gift. But it is also our challenge. This challenge means to remain open to each other, to learn from each other along the way, and from our different perspectives, lifestyles, and different ways to live our Christian faith. By sharing our different perspectives in a respectful manner, we could gently help one another to look beyond our individual imagination and knowledge and to understand more about how God is (through the example of Christ) and show the people around us through our loving and appreciative treatment of each other what a reconciled future with God in Christ might look like.

I would like to conclude with a quote from the Epistle to the Ephesians, which we have already heard today. St. Paul writes: "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." (Ephesians 3.18-19) **Amen.**

Summary

The future is inherently unpredictable in some way. Both human imagination and knowledge are limited. John's gospel asks us to believe in Jesus in order to participate in the divine life in the present moment and live and look beyond our current understanding and knowledge. Trust and hope in God's future with us provide a perspective on our unique circumstances in a fear-filled world. As the diverse community of Christ Church Vienna, we are people on a journey who should love one another, learn from one another, and strengthen one another to be a source of hope in this world.

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