

## SERMON 20.11.16

### **What's in your hand?**

#### **John 6: 1-15**

#### **Introduction:**

Last Sunday our guest speaker, Philip Kua, asked the question: How can we flourish when the circumstances are not conducive to growth? The image he finished with was a tree growing out of a brick wall – a reminder that seeds can sprout in the most unlikely places. It gave encouragement to us as a church when we are going through a transition time. But waiting doesn't mean that we sit back passively and not take action where we can.

#### **What are the signs of flourishing?**

It's good to see the signs of flourishing in this time: Croxton Special School Concert here on Thursday evening; Op Shop Market yesterday. A mural painted on the side wall of our buildings, in conjunction with Darebin Council and Corrections Victoria - a positive expression of support in a constructive project.

Hundreds of people are in these buildings regularly from diverse backgrounds. It's a recognition that what happens here during the week **is** the church's mission.

Here's another example. A participant arrived one morning earlier this week and mentioned that her daughter was in hospital. She was quite upset, so a staff member asked her if she would like the ministers to pray for her daughter. She was grateful.

But that's not the end of the story. Another participant was standing nearby and overheard the conversation. He said to the staff member that he was really encouraged to know that he was in a place where people cared enough to pray. Similar stories would come from Connect or Harbour.

What undergirds the practical service and help that is offered through the Careworks programs is the motive of wanting people to flourish in their individual lives, no matter how difficult their circumstances. This is deepened and strengthened through prayer which releases a spirit of care and compassion through the engagement that we have with people.

It's a significant time to recognise that we can do what we can, using the resources we have. We don't need to sit and wait for a Ministry Team Leader to come. In fact, it will be a gift for a Team Leader to come to a church community that continues to be active in mission and flourishing. It's a time when each one of us can think about what we can do to make a difference not only in the life of Northern but in the places where we live and work.

### **So I ask today: What is in your hand?**

That is what God will use. Look at your hands – hold them open. Your life experiences, interests, study, work, time, money – your abilities, your strengths, your weaknesses.

The story of the feeding of the five thousand holds a lesson for us in recognising the capacity of Jesus to use what is available and what we are willing to share – and in the process to maximise it. I have a plate and a goblet which I bought in Nazareth, the place where Jesus grew up. It has a mosaic of the five loaves and two fish which feature in the miracle story. This mosaic is a common theme in that area, which is not far from Galilee, where the miracle took place. It is the only miracle that is recorded in every one of the four gospels.

### **Bible reading: John 6: 1-15.**

What strikes you about this reading?

What does it say to you today – in your own circumstances?

What does it say to our church community?

#### **1. Jesus responded after hearing the response of the disciples.**

The story says that Jesus already knew what he was going to do about feeding the multitude, but he tested the disciples first to see what they came up with. He stimulated their thinking about what a human response would be – which focused on the enormity of the challenge and the unlikelihood that they had an answer.

**The human response:** V7 - 'Even if we worked for months, we wouldn't have enough money to feed them.'

V9 - 'There's a young boy here with five barley loaves and two fish. But what good is that with this huge crowd?'

**God's response:** V11 - 'They all ate as much as they wanted.'

V13 - 'So they picked up the pieces and filled twelve baskets with scraps left.'

The human response is with limited vision. They focused on what they didn't have. We don't always see the whole picture or what can be done. Our human decisions and responses can be affected by negativity, criticism, or a sense of hopelessness.

That's why in an organisation, or family, or church community, we need the wisdom of others to guide us, to help us have a shared vision which is bigger than what any one of us can have on our own. When we seek God's wisdom, guidance and help in the everyday matters that concern us as well as the big decisions that we have to make, God's response is beyond what we could

imagine.

‘... by the power at work within us God is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine...’ (Ephesians 3: 20)

That power is at work within each one of us – and within the whole church community.

## **2. Jesus met the need through people.**

He involved the disciples and a young boy. He could have acted on his own, but he chose not to. Imagine if you were the young boy that day. I wonder what happened to him in his life – whether he became a follower of Jesus?

By involving the disciples, Jesus was teaching them by example. Andrew found the boy who had the barley loaves and two fish – the commentaries say that barley loaves were the food of the poor. Even when they didn’t have enough faith, or know how to respond to the problem at hand, Jesus included them. He used them to help people sit down and to distribute the food.

The effectiveness of a church community depends on the combined efforts of many people. It’s not only about what is seen. The unseen is just as important – the cleaning, the visiting, the praying, the giving, the encouragement given one to one. As the church, we are a body of people and each one has something to contribute for the benefit and growth of the whole body. As this happens, it strengthens the church and flows into the community around us.

## **3. Jesus used the resources which were available.**

He took the food that was there - he gave thanks to God – he distributed it.

What resources are in your hand? What resources do we have as a church community?

We might be thinking – we need a Team Leader – yes we do, and we need to be praying about that. We might think – we need a new building, we need a new roof, we need maintenance repairs, we need more musicians, we need more children, we need young people – there’s nothing wrong with that wish list. But – God is already working with what we have and who we have. Each one of you is a valuable part of this church community.

November has been a challenging month for the church. We could have said we need to put everything on hold. But that is not what has happened. Careworks and the office have continued to function. Sundays have continued to flow. We have seen people step up and exercise responsibility. We have had a number of special events. Leadership Group is doing their part in the matters behind the scenes to see that we have good oversight and support.

During the week the Careworks supervisors, staff and ministry team had a meal together to farewell a staff member. It was an important time when we were able to thank the staff member for years of work, and also help all of the staff to realise that when challenges come, we pull together, we all do that little bit extra, and the work continues.

#### **4. Jesus disengaged from the human agenda to engage with God's agenda.**

Notice what happens after the miracle. Jesus had insight about the crowd - the emotion that was whipped up, but he would not submit himself to their desires and hopes. They wanted him to be their king. Instead he slipped away - alone, for prayer, to disengage from the human agenda and engage with God's agenda.

Perhaps in his thoughts was the time he had alone in the wilderness after his baptism and before he began his public ministry, when he was tempted to go the way of popularity. The devil promised him all the glory of the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would kneel and worship him. Jesus resisted then, and it set a pattern for his ministry - and for us. 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.' (Matthew 4: 10)

It's a lesson for all of us in our life – take time to be restored. Have time alone for prayer, for reflection, for letting things settle – so you are ready for the next challenge. Times of silence might be rare – I need to be intentional about silence, or it doesn't happen. It balances the noise, the busyness, the demands that can devour us.

Churches need times of rest after intense activity. The ministry team recognises this after the past few weeks of a number of intense activities, beyond what we normally do. We are intentionally having a slower time in this coming week. So the church can be restored. So there can be a spirit of calm – so people have time for conversations instead of being very task-oriented.

#### **Conclusion:**

I come back to the question - What is in your hand?

God can use what you have and who you are, if you offer it in a spirit of willingness and availability. He will use it to bless others in the church and community.

What is in Northern Community Church's hand? The gifts of God's people, the resources of all the participants who are part of the Careworks programs, the gatherings of people through the week, the constructive activities which engage people in gardening, hospitality, maintenance, sewing, the shop, the prayer. God uses these to enrich life for many.

What are you going to do with what is in your hand? Grasp and hold on? Or offer to God what you have and who you are, so that blessing will flow through you to others.