

**Reflection on the Gospel-18th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A
(Matthew 14:13-21)**

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According to the most recent International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) Report, the number of people living in extreme poverty has fallen below ten percent of the global population for the first time in history, down from nineteen per cent in 1990. The same figures hold for the undernourished in our world. Encouraging as the improved statistics may be, it is still a fact that almost three quarters of a billion people have less than \$US1.90 per day to meet all their basic needs for food, shelter and security and this situation has been seriously exacerbated by the outbreak of Covid-19. It is difficult in our affluent society to imagine the plight of so many in the war-torn countries of our world or to get inside the desperation of parents watching their children die from starvation. According to research conducted by Footprint Melbourne, Melburnians waste enough food annually to feed two million people at a cost of \$3.5 million. That may be changing in these times of pandemic and somewhat heightened awareness of the suffering of those on the edge..

What has this to do with our gospel reflection? In the first reading from Isaiah, God tells the “thirsty”: “Listen and delight in rich food...Incline your ear, and come to me; listen that you may live”. The gospel reading from Matthew tells a story of hungry people “hearing”, following Jesus, and enjoying an abundance of life-sustaining food. In other words, Matthew presents Jesus as the one who makes the Isaian dream a reality for those who hunger and thirst both literally and figuratively. The passage echoes key aspects of Israel’s history. Jesus retreats to a “desert” place, recalling the experience of God’s people in the wilderness of Sinai. Those who follow Jesus find life-restoring food in the desert, evoking the manna that God provided for the hungry in the Sinai desert.

Jesus has compassion for people struggling with disease and thirsting for the means to live. In biblical terms, compassion is always accompanied by action for restorative justice. Jesus heals the sick and creates a structure for the sharing of resources. Faced with a hungry crowd, the disciples offer a simple solution: “Send them away.” Sending the desperate away is a travesty of gospel compassion in a way of life that claims Eucharist as its central tenet. It has, sadly, been part of our national response to many hungering and thirsting for life and security. Jesus refuses such a solution and invites his disciples instead to take some personal responsibility for the situation. The gospel invites us as contemporary disciples to attend to food security in our world and to address ways of meeting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal of eliminating poverty and hunger by 2030. Informing ourselves on the issues might be one place to begin. Another might be to check supplies before shopping for more food than we need.