

## Sermon Archive 543

Sunday 6 July, 2025

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Human rights: Access to food

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



### **Background to the Writing of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights**

As reports emerged, post-war, of the atrocities committed by the German Nazis, and the full scale of what had happened began to sink in, the relatively new United Nations formed the view that a statement should be made about basic human rights. A small work group was set up, and Eleanor Roosevelt (recently departed from the White House) was appointed to coordinate its work. Initially, it was thought that a Bill of Rights might be what the doctor ordered; but it soon became clear that a bill (a legally binding international document) was going to be too complicated across international jurisdictions. It seemed more realistic to create a "declaration" - a kind of aspirational document, the principles of which could be enshrined in constitutions and legal systems by member states as they saw fit. The declaration was going to be a kind of inspiration to "best practice".

It was decided that if it was going to be truly universal, then it needed to avoid any major cultural assumptions - and so the small work group was chosen deliberately to be culturally and religiously diverse. That, of course, required a lot of patience, understanding, openness from its members. And it also involved a "Presbyterianising of pace". In a delightful extract from Roosevelt's memoir, we read:

*"Dr. Chang (China) was a pluralist and held forth in charming fashion on the proposition that there is more than one kind of ultimate reality. The Declaration, he said, should reflect more than simply Western ideas and Dr. Humphrey (Canada) would have to be eclectic in his approach. His remark, though addressed to Dr. Humphrey, was really directed at Dr. Malik (Lebanon), from whom it drew a prompt retort as he expounded at some length the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. Dr. Humphrey joined*

*enthusiastically in the discussion, and I remember that at one point Dr. Chang suggested that the Secretariat might well spend a few months studying the fundamentals of Confucianism!"*

The "world-view and values" to and fro was sufficiently well-handled for the third draft of the document to be adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 - 48 votes in favour, none against, 8 abstained, while Honduras and Yemen somehow failed to vote.

The document has a preamble and thirty articles. This month we are exploring Article 25 - today focusing on the right to food.

### **The food Situation - 2025**

The photo on the front page of the order of service is over a year old now. It comes from March 2024 - Gaza. That was before any formal blockade of aid had been established. Technically, there is no famine in Gaza - "famine" has not been declared". Commenting, though, on the findings of a recent food security analysis done by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) partnership, of which the World Health Organisation is a member, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said:

*"We do not need to wait for a declaration of famine in Gaza to know that people are already starving, sick and dying, while food and medicines are minutes away across the border. Today's report shows that without immediate access to food and essential supplies, the situation will continue to deteriorate, causing more deaths and descent into famine." . . . Three quarters of Gaza's population are at "Emergency" or "Catastrophic" food deprivation levels.*

There is food - but there seems to be no will to distribute it.

It's not just Gaza. In May, the Global Report on Food Crises claimed that 295.3 million people world-wide face acute food insecurity. This represents a tripling of hunger since 2016, and a doubling since 2020. The report says that highest contributors to the numbers come from Gaza, but also Sudan and South Sudan. These contribution figures don't quite add up to me - since the World Food Program USA ranks the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, Yemen and Syria as hungrier than Gaza and the Sudans. Again, though, all of these

countries have been subject to political instability and conflict. It seems, in these days, when we can't get on, some of us end up hungry.

Here in Aotearoa New Zealand, the new symbol for escalating food costs is the \$8.00 block of butter. Our foodbanks are working hard, some with much reduced funding. The work of those in the foodbanks is brave and inspiring.

And at home, I continue to eat pretty well. I have butter!

**Knox Singers:** Ave Verum  
Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

**Lesson:** Matthew 14: 13-21

**Reflection:** Jesus handles a food crisis

When you think about how basic food is, what happens when you don't have it; and when you consider the numbers of people dying of starvation, it's all quite daunting. Out of some kind of necessity, do we turn away? The disciples of Jesus turned away - not from a humanitarian crisis, you understand - but from the gap opened up between a large crowd of people and their capacity to feed them.

As they speak to Jesus about the situation, we see an entirely rational conversation about assessment of need, assessment of resources, and the obvious solution - which is to direct the people to somewhere else, where there might be enough resources, but whether or not there are, at least the hungry people won't be our problem anymore. As the mathematics get done, there is a compelling sense to it.

Editorial note: it's quite common for hungry people to move on from where they are, to somewhere else, since somewhere else might have possibility. Often though, the way to somewhere else is closed by borders between this country and that, and governments feeling like they're not going to be able to cope with an influx.

Having done their assessment of the situation, and having made their recommendation to Jesus that the people be sent away, Jesus says to them "you feed them". WE HAVE NO FOOD! Have you not been listening?

No, you **feel** that you have no food - but is there anything that might unlock something you haven't yet considered? **The Word of Christ.**

They do a wee search, coming up with five loaves and two fish. In John's version of the story, they actually have absolutely nothing - the few morsels are provided by some poor little boy. Jesus first response to the hunger is to ask his people to consider looking in places they haven't yet considered.

I've preached this story many times. Each time, I find myself enjoying the idea of a Jesus who can turn one into two, then into four, then into eight . . . just with a prayer to his God.

Each time, though, I also find myself thinking about one person giving what they have to the hunger of the crowd - wondering if that act of faith might release others to do the same - until from the community that said it didn't have enough, all are fed. The miracle is the defeating of "this is mine", and the releasing of the spirit of "let us share". Anyway . . .

Some people say that the world has enough food for us all to live well. The problem is that we aren't willing to share. Certainly, in Gaza, and Sudan, Congo, Afghanistan, Yeme, Syria, political disinclination to share is a major thing. Is the miracle we await the liberation of the spirit of sharing?

If so, one small loaf of bread might just feed eighty people in a church in Ōtautahi Christchurch - in a way.

The declaration of Human Rights seeks to be faith-neutral and culture neutral. We come at things from a different angle. We come as those who have heard Christ say "you feed them", and then witnessed a miracle.

So how does this sound in our ears? How does this rest in our hearts? Everyone has the right to food.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.