

Follow the Tiger

A Sermon on Matthew 14:13-21 by Rick Fabian, Sunday 6 August 2013

On this day, people of every modern nation remember the horrific atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Can we not stop a moment now to pray silently together for world peace?

In the readings appointed for this Sunday:

Jacob wrestles with the angel -- and Christ miraculously feeds 5000 people. These two stories together put me in mind of a Persian Sufi story. At the battle of Acre in 1191, Persian Sahdi of Shiraz was captured and enslaved by Christian Crusaders, including the English King Richard the Lion-hearted. After Sahdi was ransomed he spent his thirteenth-century life as a traveling mystic and poet. His Iranian tomb still draws pilgrims today—I have prayed there. Here is one of Sahdi's mystical stories.

A man walking through a forest saw a fox that had lost its legs in a trap, and he wondered how the creature survived, since foxes chase their prey. Then a tiger entered the clearing, carrying its kill in its mouth. The tiger lay down, ate its fill, and returned to the forest, leaving the remains for the fox to eat. Next day the man passed by and saw the same thing happen again. He wondered at the mysterious Providence of God feeding all the creatures, and said "I too shall sit here and see how God feeds me." So the man sat down and began to wait. But nothing happened; and after two days he heard a voice: "Foolish man, follow the example of the tiger, and stop imitating the disabled fox!"

That story usually brings a laugh, as people catch the surprise in it. A lesson on how God's Providence actually works, by people sharing when they have more above their own needs. No demand to search for pure intentions, or display the highest moral standards—just be generous with what extra we have gained, however we gained it. Introspection can get in the way.

Luckily, we have lots of options to choose from today. We can give to two kinds of charitable organizations: creators; and problem-solvers. The Creators offer us a chance to join up making something new or beautiful: new music, new art, new buildings. You and I may not be creative geniuses, but we can still join in. I know a building contractor who asked a workman digging a ditch, 'What are you doing?' and the man replied, "I'm building a cathedral."

On the other hand, most charitable organizations are problem-solvers. They work to solve world hunger, or world injustice, or world warfare. Choosing which organization will use your gifts best is a complex problem in itself—but don't be intimidated. Sahdi's Tiger story tells an answer: give what you have extra, and God's Providence will use it. Choosing the very best charity is not your chief job. God will provide you a receiver.

Charitable giving defines humankind. Other species protect and advance their young and their own kin. —Our fellow primates do that; even tigers do that. But protecting beyond your own kinfolk is rare in the animal world. And humans do it in two distinctive ways: our circle of compassion keeps expanding, as other animals' doesn't; and we link up doing charitable work

together, with people we don't know. One navy captain told me his highest pride from the awful VietNam War was bringing his whole shipload of soldiers home safe. Archaeologists excavating pre-historic graves reckon this is what made us *homo sapiens sapiens* outlast the Neanderthal and every other early hominid. As they put it: "being associated is clearly better than being stronger."

Last month we heard about the sower sowing in bad soils. Rocks, weeds, hungry birds—most congregations today wonder introspectively, which of the bad soils is their own. But in fact, most bad soils are familiar to every farmer—though not all happen at once, normally. That gospel story's actual point comes in the punch line at the end. Despite those many bad soils the harvest comes in a hundred fold! Without fertilizers back then, just tenfold was a bumper crop; so a hundred was simply miraculous arithmetic, that only God's Providence could possibly bring.

Some of Jesus' parables feature numbers like that. In today's gospel reading, Jesus does the hugest arithmetic: five loaves and fishes feed 5000. No wonder there's so much extra food left over! Somehow God's powerful Providence always creates extra. That's what Sahdi's Tiger does with his kill. Extra shows us God at work.

Thanks chiefly to modern medicines, our world population has grown so, that half the people ever born are alive today. Instead of sharing our plenty, however, in the United States we are watching now a decline in charitable giving. Religious bodies actually lead that statistical decline. More total cash is donated every year—but by fewer people. 40% of households give no money to any non-profit charity at all. Young people donate less than in earlier periods. Philanthropy involves fewer donors. Does that include you and me, and all Australia? If God's Providence creates extra for you and me, what shall we do with it?

In Islamic countries, you see people donating to beggars all the time. --Maybe just tiny gifts on the street. But their fasting month of Ramadan ended just last May. And during Ramadan, faithful muslims give more than small change daily. After you have fasted all day, you don't just go home to eat and drink by yourself. You put a table in the street outside your house, so your neighbors—and hungry strangers—can stop by your house, and feast there. Maybe not every muslim household does this, but you can see Ramadan tables in many city streets, and you can visit neighborhood mosques and join their party for a little time.

Most Australians would join in generously if they knew how to. In fact, feeding the world's hungry is like housing the homeless: a problem we seem to struggle with, in every country. Our big question is, how can you and I follow the Tiger here and now?

We want to think about World Peace today. The prospect overwhelms our imagination. World Peace is like Jacob wrestling with that angel. Everybody wants Peace, and yet it takes struggle everywhere. Our newspapers are full of struggles day by day. Even in your own city and country, among your next-door neighbors: all struggling for peace.

If World Peace comes in our time, it will come much like feeding the hungry—by God's Providence. Let us not sit down like the man in that story, and wait to see what God's Providence will do. All of us go to the polls, or should, every year. Any of us, however poor, can

donate to organizations working for peace—You already know your favorites among so many outfits out there. You can even donate your time, a commodity more precious than money because it's irreplaceable. You do really have some time extra, so ring up any one outfit and volunteer. On Hiroshima Memorial Day, you and I can learn peacemaking from the Persian mystic Sahdi Shirazi. Follow the example of the Tiger, and stop imitating the disabled fox.