



Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon by Revd Margaret Place



Sunday 2 August 2020

READINGS

Genesis 32: 22-31; Psalm 17: 1-7; Romans 9: 1-5; Matthew 14: 13-21

Feeding the five thousand

I wonder if we don't all feel a bit sorry for Jesus in this story. The one person on earth who understood him fully, his cousin, John the Baptist had been illegally killed by Herod through the manipulations of his step-daughter and her mother. Jesus wanted to get away, have a break and mourn for his friend and perhaps work out what the implications of this might mean for his ministry and the safety of his disciples. But the crowds wouldn't leave him alone. They tracked him down brought their sick, their questions, their anger and confusion, and Jesus had pity on them. So putting his own needs aside, he taught them for the whole day.

It was the disciples who reminded him that it was dark and the people needed to go and buy food from the surrounding villages. Jesus told the disciples THEY should give them food. I wonder why? Was he trying to test the disciples – teach them they ought to think further than just the next half an hour? Was he sensible of the fact that 5000 men plus families would completely swamp the little settlements in what was a “remote” place? Was he just exhausted after his own tragedy plus the day spent teaching people spiritually starved, and the disciples statement were irritating? Did he have a miracle in mind? Who knows! Anyway, the disciples were put on the spot. Jesus had to take over. The disciples could only scare up five loaves and two fish and these were given to Jesus. Did disciples feel a bit stupid or helpless?

Jesus took charge. He got the people to sit, he took the bread and the fish, and did what was and is still done at every Jewish meal. He gave thanks to God, he broke the bread and then got the disciples to serve it to everyone. Everyone was fed, and 12 baskets of food were carefully collected afterwards. An amazing event – the only miracle which is recorded in all four Gospels.

So is this all? I think if we get beneath the wonder of so much food being made out of so little, we can see how Jesus works. In spite of the fact it was a wonderful miracle, there are principles at work here which we would do well to consider.

Firstly, Jesus was tired and was emotionally overwrought. He needed downtime. But the people found him and crowded round him. His response was to HAVE COMPASSION ON THEM. If we are to be like Christ as we are called to be, there are times when our needs are secondary to those of others around us. We can see this in medical services at the moment. Many are working long hours, retired people have come back, medical students are

offering to help, and no one is taking leave. Because of the nature of the Covid disease, nurses are also doing the work of hospice staff – becoming families for those whose families are not allowed see them. For most Covid 19 deaths, the last human face seen by a dying person is that of a nurse who is doing her best for someone he or she doesn't know. Not a wonder the medical staff are becoming burned out. But they can't afford to stop so they don't.

We are being asked a lot less. We can't go anywhere, we wear those awfully uncomfortable masks, browsing through our favourite shops is a no-no, and we are so tired of the same old same old. And underlying it all is an anxiety that we or someone we love is going to be caught by this thing. And it's not going to stop, so we have no choice but to keep going.

Secondly, the 5000 plus that Jesus was teaching and subsequently fed were under the heel of Rome. In those days taxes were paid by the lowest classes. The leaders lived off what the peasants and workers and the equivalent of the lower middle classes were forced to pay. As a result, if a family was fed by the end of the day, the householder could relax for a few hours before he began the long hours and extra labour to earn enough to pay these taxes and hopefully have enough over to feed his family. If Jesus had retreated to a remote area, you can bet that those in the crowd included those from the very villages the disciples thought would sell food to the hungry. But the reality was that the people had nothing because they couldn't afford it. I think this could well be why Jesus told the *disciples* to feed them because they were not able to feed themselves.

So they ate, and 12 baskets were collected afterwards. What would have happened to those baskets? I remember some years ago at a previous parish, we would give a Christmas party to the homeless who frequented the soup kitchen. The first year we noticed there was a lot of waste which was upsetting to those who had gone to a lot of trouble to make a special meal for those whom society usually ignored. It turned out that homeless people eat so little and so infrequently that their stomachs shrink, and a moderate sized two course Christmas meal is too much at one time. After that, the organisers gave them food in a polystyrene box so that anything not eaten could be taken away and provide another meal, probably the next day. If Jesus was dealing with hungry poor people, those 12 remaining baskets could well have served the same purpose – another meal for the following day. What luxury for them!

How much food are we eating, and what do we do with what is left over? **We** are not that kind of poor, and often we waste what we have bought, but up to 50% of our country is either unemployed or under-employed. Many of our fellow countrymen and women go to bed hungry, and the Virus has made it worse for a whole lot more. I know our church and many others have their social outreach portfolio, and I'm sure they carry out a wonderful ministry to such people, but the last five months have seen a virtual doubling of such need. Are we able to give double what we are currently giving? How can we help the most needy at this time? And how do we make ourselves more responsible in the way we use the food God has given us?

Thirdly, look at the way it was done. Jesus made them sit down. Jesus followed Jewish protocol and said grace first. It was all orderly. If we are going to do as Jesus did, our giving must be responsible and orderly. Everyone must have equal opportunity to get the food they need, and the food must be used to the best of our ability to see that nothing is wasted and those who donated will know their gifts were well used.

We pray every Sunday "your kingdom come, your will be done in earth as in heaven." God's kingdom begins with those who are hungry and sick and uneducated and they need to be looked after before they are expected to come to church and say their prayers. What loaves and fishes can we give to God for God to do great things with?

Let me end with another soup kitchen story. When we were on retreat at St Benedicts many years ago, the sisters gave sandwiches and something to drink every Thursday at around tea time through the dining room window to the homeless in their area. At the end of that weekend when we were enjoying the last meal before going home, someone quipped something along the lines of the fact she she had two teenage sons who played rugby and often brought their friends home for a meal – always out of the blue. “It’s amazing how I can make a meal stretch in those circumstances. The miracle of the loaves and fishes is one of the most practical and most repeated miracle from the bible.” She then said to one of the sisters, “do you find the same thing with feeding the poor?” The sister replied “Most definitely.” And she went on to say that often they had no idea how they were going to make supplies last, but always, somehow, there was enough.