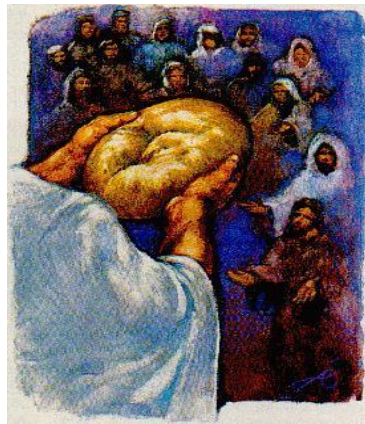


Ninth Sunday After Pentecost (2 August 2020)

Lectionary Reading: Matthew 14:13-21



I'm sure we've all been there - that last minute phone call from family members or friends saying 'We're just around the corner! We thought we might just pop in and see you'. You have answered the phone - so they know you are in. Can't get out of that one! Besides you really would like to see them, but it's almost dinner time and you know that the cottage pie in the oven is only enough for the six of you (as in our case with four growing kids) and certainly won't stretch to an extra two. Panic sets in....

Should you rush off to Woolworths or Coles to see what you can find to stretch it out with? Perhaps you could blindly look in the freezer trying to find anything to hook out that only takes a short while to cook from frozen? I'm sure I'm not alone in having done that! Or finally, just to share the hysteria around, should you pick up the phone and plead with your husband to come home earlier from work with a take-away for eight?!

It had not been a good week for Jesus. He'd been rejected by his own hometown, his cousin John the Baptist, had been beheaded by Herod as a party favour for his daughter, and Jesus knew that he may be next. And so

Jesus goes to a deserted place by himself. He needs time to think and pray. He needs time to regroup.

But there will be no private place for Jesus to grieve, no quiet time for Him to weep over John, no time to prepare himself for what lies ahead to do all that God has called him to do, even when it seems difficult – for the crowd refuse to let Him out of their sight. They are hungry for his teaching; they are hungry for his healing – and so they are relentless in their pursuit of him. So Jesus, seeking solitude is immediately welcomed by the incessant clamouring and begging and pleading of a crowd of some five thousand, and more.

Matthew 14:14 says he had compassion on the people who had followed him, not anger at his thwarted attempt at solitude, not impatience because these people just will not leave him alone. But compassion – that deeply felt, from the gut sympathy and kindness and caring and concern that we have met with in Jesus before. And Jesus begins to heal the sick, and continues teaching them.

We are told that it was getting late by which time the disciples were getting a bit fed-up with this crowd, so they come and ask Jesus to send them away, and one of the best excuses they can come up with is that there's nothing to eat. "Send the crowds away, send them home, so that they may buy food for themselves" they say to Jesus.

But Jesus, always the provider of his people's needs is having none of it and in what has to be one of the best examples of leadership delegation and empowerment in the Bible ever, he throws the problem back at the disciples. "You yourselves give them something to eat!" he says!

This story of the feeding of the five thousand is of course one that we are all very familiar with. It is the one miracle along with the resurrection that is included in all four Gospels. Each Gospel tells this story in its own way, and records different elements and details about it. And yet they all report that the same basic events happened – Jesus fed the five thousand with what was available.

Five thousand is a lot of people. It's perhaps not surprising then that the disciples wanted them to go away and fend for themselves. They have nothing, nothing but five loaves and a couple of fish. Now, I don't blame the disciples. I might have said the same thing. They are just being realistic. But Jesus says 'I can work with that'.... He has the people sit down and we know how the rest of the story goes. "All ate and were filled." According to Matthew there is not only enough to feed all of them, there is enough and more... 12 baskets full of broken pieces left over.

And that's what we see in the story of the feeding of the five thousand.. God – Jesus – multiplying the little that was given to him, in abundance.

As Christians the call to discipleship is a matter of sharing and giving, not just of our material resources, but what we have in faith, hope, and love. But like the disciples, what prevents us is often the belief that our unrealistic resources won't make any appreciable difference. So often we are tempted to believe, as the disciples did, that in the face of overwhelming need we have nothing to offer.

I know for myself, and perhaps you know it too, that often we look at the smallness of our own offering, and the insignificance of our abilities, the inadequacy of our treasure, right up against the greatness of whatever need we face, and we think it's a reason to feel shame or helplessness. Or we act

as though smallness, inadequacy and insignificance are things that would never be worthy to be brought before God.

And yet every parable about God's kingdom, every teaching Jesus ever had about how God creates something wonderful and glorious, starts with something small. Never once did Jesus say the kingdom of heaven is like the ASX top 100 company full of shiny, happy shareholders. It's always something small, insignificant, over-looked, these are the things that reveal the true glory of God.

Among the weekly chapel services I conduct while chaplain at Perth College was for ages K-3. At this service a collection was taken and every week the little ones came in clutching their money boxes or coins. One afternoon one of them said to me; "Rev Pat I only have twenty cents today, it won't help anyone" – I went on to explain how all the coins, 5, 10, 20 cents etc. collected at our services were sent to Anglicare at the end of the year and would make a BIG difference to someone's life, even though it might not seem that way from the little we give.

I am reminded of another story similar to the "loaves and fishes" you could say a modern parable that speaks about making a difference - I'm sure many of you will be familiar with it.

"A man was walking along a beach. The sun was shining and it was a beautiful day. Off in the distance he could see someone running back and forth between the surf's edge and the beach. Back and forth, back and forth this person went. As the man got closer he could see that there were hundreds of starfish stranded on the sand as the result of the natural action of the tide.

As he approached the person continued the task of picking up the starfish one by one and throwing them back into the surf. The man was stuck by the apparent futility of the task. There were far too many starfish. Many of them were sure to perish. As he came up to the person he said, "You must be crazy. There are thousands of miles of beach covered with starfish. You can't possibly make a difference." The person looked at the man, then stooped down and picked up a starfish and threw it back into the ocean. Turning back to the man they said, "It sure made a difference to that one!"

The feeding of the five thousand recounts how the smallest, almost insignificant amount of resources were abundantly multiplied. With God, five loaves and two fish was enough, it was more than enough. And surely in our lives, when we feel inadequate or what we have to offer seems so small, through Christ, it is enough. He makes it more than enough. Offered to God in faith, hope and love; he is able to multiply our efforts and our gifts, in such a way that it becomes more than sufficient for our needs and the needs of others. That is indeed good news!

As Mother Teresa of Calcutta once said; "There are no great things, only small things with great love."

The Lord be with you.