

9th Sunday after Trinity

2 Kings 4. 42 - 44; Ephesians 3. 14- 21; John 6. 1 - 21

“Little is much when God is in it”

Our Gospel reading this morning is one of the most familiar of all Bible stories. Something we probably first heard in our younger days and one that has remained with us ever since. Aside from the resurrection, the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels. Clearly the Gospel writers must have considered this a significant event. Interestingly, in Matthew’s account of this event he refers to the 5,000 “besides women and children.” Some Bible scholars believe the actual number fed on that day could have been between 15,000 and 20,000 people. This is a staggering number.

Jesus’s disciples had wanted to send the people away because evening was approaching and they were in a remote place. They knew that people needed to reach surrounding villages soon to buy food and find lodgings, or they would go hungry. However, Jesus had a better idea. In Matthew’s Gospel, which incidentally also contains a remarkably similar account of Jesus feeding 4,000, he says to his disciples “You give them something to eat.” Perhaps at this point the disciples should have remember the other miracles that they had seen Jesus perform. However, Andrew, after finding a boy with five loaves and two small fishes, asks,

“How far will they go among so many?” Earlier Philip had said that it would take more than half a year’s wages just to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite.

Of course, we know the outcome. Jesus gave thanks, broke the bread, and there was more than enough for all. This speaks to me of the overflowing generosity and provision of God in Jesus. He lavished them with so much food that there were twelve baskets left over. [I wonder what they did with the left overs!].

Apart from the obvious physical fact that everyone had enough to eat, “and was satisfied”, doesn’t it immediately say something to us about the sacrifice that Jesus was later to make upon the cross when his body was broken for all. Later in this same chapter Jesus says “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry.” There’s a wonderful inclusivity in this and perhaps a lesson here for us as a church. Jesus welcomes all, and all are welcome as we gather around his table later this morning to take bread and wine. The body of Jesus, broken for us, is enough to feed the spiritual needs of the whole of humanity

Of course, there are the sceptics who question what happened at this event. Some would say that many of the people actually had food with them and they when the young boy offered his packed lunch, their consciences were pricked and they all produced – and shared – what they had. I must leave you to make up your minds about what happened.

The familiarity of this story means that it is easy to overlook what we might learn from. It is, of course, a revelation of Jesus as the Messiah who will meet all the needs of his people. It looks to the way in which his body would become like broken bread for humanity. But there are some practical applications for us and so this morning I want to try and take a fresh look at this familiar story.

One obvious thing is that Jesus calls his followers to have the same compassion that he had. If we see the poor, the needy, the hungry, and are moved with compassion, then we must follow Jesus's instructions and give them something to eat. We may not have much, but we probably have more than the needy. We may fear that they will only squander what is given to them, or that we should not give because it will only encourage them to remain poor and dependant – but that is not what the Bible tells us to be concerned about. If we become more Christ like we will be moved by compassion, and we will start to meet people's needs.

I was struck last week as Leslie Flaxman shared with us about the Garden Route Trust and how the charity was feeding about 5000 children and how we can have a part to play in that. We can be like the disciples. We can be the hands of Jesus in such situations.

Of course, there is something else, much closer to hand, which this miracle should help turn our minds to, and that is the Cobham Food Bank.

I spoke with Hugh Bryant a few days ago about the current work of the Food Bank. Set up five years ago, in the last year the Food Bank has distributed about 22 metric tonnes of food. 740 vouchers were issued providing food for 2,400 people. The demands upon the Food Bank will be increased substantially later this year as Universal Credit kicks in. They are expecting a thirty to forty per cent increase in demand. In addition to the food that is generously given, they may need to spend up to £50 a week in buying extra food.

Unfortunately, our own MP, during the course of a television debate, insensitively dismissed food bank users as people with a temporary cash flow problem. Would to God that were the truth! The fact is that in the world in which live the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. This results from benefit changes, debt (perhaps brought about by redundancy), low income, no access to public funds and long-term sickness. And then there are the refugee families seeking a safe haven from the ongoing trouble spots in the world.

We should not forget the adage “There but the grace of God, go I.”

But I am not here this morning to simply promote the Food Bank. It is another of the causes supported by our Faith and Social Action group and a more focused presentation of its work will be given later in the year. I just want to use this as an example of how we can be like the disciples of Jesus.

In the story of the Feeding of the 5,000 it is significant that Jesus didn't simply snap his fingers and cause everyone present to be fed. Instead he used his disciples – his followers – to distribute. They were as much a part of the miracle as he was. But they could only give as they had received and so the disciples were put in a position of total dependence upon him for the supply. And, of course, this has been the case down through the course of history.

There was a foreshadowing of this miracle in the life of Elisha that we heard about in our OT reading from 2 Kings when 100 were fed in a miraculous way. In that account it is the servant of Elisha who questions how the people are to be fed. But he obeyed his master “and they ate and had something left over.” This is our God. He says that he will do more than provide for his people; he will give in abundance.

There is a saying “Little is much when God is in it” and, if we take away nothing else this morning, let us remember that. One commentator has written, “God will shatter the pint-sized expectations of what his followers can do if they would learn to bring to him what they have already been given.”

As Christians we are called to bring our lives to God in a spirit of obedience and sacrifice, no matter how insignificant we may think our gifts or talents are. Paul in his letter to the Romans wrote, “Therefore, I urge

you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God."

I wonder what the young boy whose packed lunch was used by Jesus thought. One small boy – five small loaves – two small fish. Yet in the hands of Jesus they fed the multitude.

All of us as followers of Jesus have unique gifts to bring to his service. We may not consider them to count for much but when offered to him and, most importantly, blessed by him, they can be used to feed both the physical and spiritual needs of humanity.

I am going to pause now and in the quiet invite you to close your eyes and allow God to bring to mind those areas in which he might be calling you to serve. Let us reflect upon our time and our talents. We may feel like the little boy with just a packed lunch or we may realise that, through what God has given to us, we have so much more to give in service to God's kingdom. We don't have to look far for those gifts. Often, they are what comes naturally to us. "Little is much when God is in it."

Lord we thank you for what you have blessed us with. We bring those gifts and our ourselves to you and ask that you will bless them as you blessed the loaves and fishes and that you will use them and us in bringing in your kingdom into this troubled and needy world.

I want to close by leaving with you a very simple cartoon drawing I saw some years ago. It speaks volumes. Often, as Christians we feel alone, isolated and vulnerable in the face of the greed, intolerance and violence in the world today. What can we do to bring change? This is where church comes in. It is in our coming together with our individual gifts that, united by his love and by the mission he has called us to, that we can truly and effectively make a difference and that is what church is all about.