

Sunday 2 August 2020

The 8th Sunday after Trinity (Proper 13, Year A)

Sermon preached by Canon Mark Niblock, Dean's Vicar

You'd hardly call us a 'great crowd' but it's great to gather together after some 5 months apart! Although, as we've been emphasizing throughout these weeks, those taking part through the online and telephone audio service facilities are very much counted as being here in spirit and will be, we hope, in person before too long. Our worship may look different, but it is good to be able once again to meet in the beauty and sacred space of this cathedral church, even if at a distance.

The gospel reading for today is the famous 'Feeding of the 5000', one of the few miracle narratives to be found in all 4 gospel accounts. Matthew's version emphasizes Jesus' compassion: despite his shock and grief at the death of John the Baptist, he is moved with love for the crowds who gather around him. Mark tells us that Jesus *teaches* them; Matthew says that he "cured their sick", underlining the deep human concern that motivated Jesus, driving him to think, not of himself, but of others.

It must have been a gruelling day- no social distancing with this crowd! As afternoon wore into evening, tummies began to rumble, the sunburn to sting, and the disciples called time: *Send the crowds away*: this is all very well Jesus, but let's shut up shop, enough is enough, tell them to go home. I'd love to have seen their faces when Jesus comes back with: *You give them something to eat!* Are you *serious* Jesus? We've spent the day healing them, and now you want us to feed them as well!

Now, opinions generally divide into those who interpret this as a miracle of multiplication, where Jesus miraculously creates plentiful food from one meagre offering, and those who see it as a miracle of distribution, where the crowds see Jesus taking the lead, begin to share what they have with one another, and find that there is more than enough to go round. You're welcome to make your own mind up about that. But arguing about what happened quite conveniently diverts us from having to consider what it means. As it stands now, in his gospel account, what is Matthew teaching us about Jesus, the world, the Church and, ultimately ourselves?

In a time of general illiteracy teachers used stories and visual prompts. One of the gospel writers' techniques is to connect OT stories with Jesus. Nowadays, although literate, our biblical imaginations are underdeveloped, and we miss associations that would be obvious to Matthew's church. They would have connected what Jesus does here with several OT passages. Exodus 16 recounts God's provision of manna- the bread from heaven- to the Israelites. Numbers 11 is the account of the same with the quails. These both took place under the leadership of Moses, Israel's great liberator. In 2 Kings 4 the prophet Elisha miraculously feeds a group of 100 with 20 barley loaves. And, finally, there is a recurring OT image of the Messianic era as a rich banquet. The message is clear: Jesus is the fulfilment of Moses and Elisha, Law and Prophets. He is the Messiah. And, as he takes, blesses, breaks and shares the bread, Matthew deliberately connects this to his actions with bread and wine at the Lord's Supper.

Perhaps by now you're thinking, 'I made the effort to get dressed and come here for *this?*' And I get it, I've taken a long time to tell you stuff you already knew! However, there is another strand to this story, and it needs to be built upon the foundation of reminding ourselves of who Jesus is for us.

One of my commentaries called this a "social miracle", making the point that the unnumbered women and children could have bumped up the overall total to maybe 20,000 people! The Gospel- good new message- of Jesus was of the Kingdom of God. A kingdom is a domain characterised by the oversight of its sovereign, and there are certain expectations of conduct and allegiance for its citizens. As such, it is a social entity. Its inhabitants relate to one another as fellow subjects under one ruler. We can, and must, never lose sight of the social element of Jesus' message. We relate to God as individuals, but in the context of fellow-subjects. It's not enough to be 'saved' individuals: Jesus calls us to create *saved communities*.

Living in community comprises responsibilities and privileges. We could read this story as a rebuke to church leaders for neglecting practical elements of community life. The disciples say *send them away*: their souls are all very well, Lord, but not their bodies. To which Jesus replies: They don't need to go anywhere; *you give them something*. He draws them into the centre of the action, forcing them to exercise care in the area they wanted to evade.

The ministry of the Church is more than singing hymns, saying prayers and supping tea. If the Church is to be a sign and foretaste of the Kingdom Jesus preached, it must attend to actual physical, bodily, material human needs, especially those in want. It isn't enough to say: come in, say your prayers and then go away and sort your own life out. Nor is it to be a soup-kitchen that provides limitless handouts. We need to grapple with *how* we support those in need, practically, in our own context, but we should not evade that basic call. Some people want to grab more than their fair share; others don't get enough because their voice cannot be heard. This miracle is not *just about* food. Rather, it is *about just* food.

For the past 5 months we have learned to engage in online worship and to practise communal spirituality apart in our homes and, as we slowly emerge back into common worship, this is a timely passage to contemplate. As Jesus blessed, broke and shared the fish and loaves, and Eucharistic bread and wine, what will *our* sharing and giving of ourselves to one another look like going forward? How can we support one another appropriately within the restrictions that still face us? And, acknowledging the serious financial concerns that face us, how can we as members of the community of faith within Belfast Cathedral, minister to the complex needs that surround us? *Send them away; you give them something*. On our return to public worship this gives us, pun intended, much food for thought.