

Homily – 02-08-20 - Pentecost 9 - Bishop Cam Venables

Readings: Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7, 16; Romans 9:1-8 (9-16);
Matthew 14:13-21

I reckon the disciples would have been astonished when a large crowd of five thousand men, and an unknown number of women and children were fed from five loaves and two fish. And, more than this, there was apparently so much left over that twelve baskets were filled after everyone had eaten! This is the only miracle recorded in all four Gospels, so clearly there is something profound and formative being remembered by the early Church, and by us.

Let's try and imagine being with the disciples as we engage with the story. Matthew's Gospel tells us that Jesus and the disciples had withdrawn to a deserted place in response to the news that their friend, John the Baptist, had been murdered by Herod while in prison. I imagine they had withdrawn because they were grieving and were looking for some time out to regroup. But the crowd could not get enough of Jesus so they followed him into that deserted place, and out of compassion Jesus taught and healed.

However, towards the end of the day I imagine the disciples were concerned about such a large number of people and their need to be fed and sheltered. So, it's easy to understand their request to, '...send the crowds away... so they can go and get something to eat from nearby villages.' But Jesus did not accept their recommendation and replied - 'you give them something to eat!' If I'd been there I would have been tempted to say, 'Are you kidding? We only have five loaves and three fish and that's not enough even to feed our little group!'

But we're told that Jesus took that small amount of food - blessed it, broke the bread, and gave it back to the disciples to distribute. Most people who interpret this passage literally believe that then, miraculously, an enormous amount of food was physically created out of nothing to feed the crowd. The term 'crowd' is a little vague and to quantify we could safely say five thousand men plus an equivalent number of women and children... so safe to suggest at least ten thousand people. Consequently, we're talking about tonnes of food not just a couple of shopping trolleys!

It's possibly helpful to note in passing that there's an echo in this of the way that God is remembered to have fed the entire nation of Israel with manna and quail while they wandered in the wilderness after escaping Egypt.

But there is another way of understanding this story of feeding the crowd which suggests that instead of food being created from nothing, the large number of people were inspired to share the food that they had brought with them and in the miracle of that sharing there was more than enough for everyone.

I wonder which way you interpret the story? Do you think of it as a miracle in which a huge volume of food was created from nothing, or a miracle in which naturally self-interested people shared what they had with strangers? In each way of understanding there is the common conclusion that with God there is always enough, and even an unexpected abundance.

Like the disciples I think we often focus on what we don't have and feel a little overwhelmed by the

scale of need in our community and our world. In solidarity with the disciples we say in a variety of ways, 'send the crowds away' ...because we don't have enough!

In response to refugees and asylum seekers who have come to Australia by boat there is an echo of this in the policy of offshore processing and detention? We have literally sent people away and have locked them up for years: people who want to work, pay taxes, send their kids to school, and live life free from the persecution they experienced in the countries of their birth.

Jesus said to his disciples, 'you give them something to eat!' and after he had blessed the meagre resources they had, he gave them back to the disciples to distribute... and there was enough. God worked through those faithful people, and there was more than enough.

In our time, we might wonder how we can challenge unjust policies towards asylum seekers and refugees such that they could find freedom in our community and contribute to it through work. Could the letters we write to our elected representatives and the conversations we have with people who share similar concern be the five barley loaves and fish that God blesses to bring about change and abundance?

And, in this ongoing time of COVID disruption we might think we don't have enough skills or equipment to build and sustain a church community that meets both online and face to face. But could the little skills we have developed over the last three months be the barley loaves and fish that God uses to bless and build our churches in ways that will surprise us?

I think it's timely to hear the words of this Gospel in which thousands are fed and consider what they might mean as we head into an uncertain week. As we worry about the growing rates of COVID infection in Victoria and New South Wales, and we wonder about the number of people who have recently become infected in Queensland. Certainly, these are challenging times which demand much of us and will continue to do so for many weeks and months to come.

We each have a part to play in getting through this time and perhaps our lives are like the bread and fish of the Gospel waiting to be blessed and shared so that in God's grace the needs of our community can be met?

Sustained by God's Spirit,
may we be blessed with courage and wisdom this week,
and may kindness and compassion be present in conversations
with both friend and stranger.
We pray in the name of the one who said,
'you give them something to eat...'
Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.