

Hastings Anglicans Together Service, 31st July 2011 – Enough!

Reading: Matthew 14: 13-21

Good morning. Our choice of gospel reading this morning has got me wondering whether at the end of the service Roger is going to produce a mellow-puff and a single teabag for morning tea! Of course the actual feeding of the 5 thousand men, plus women and children, isn't really the central point of this story, and I can say that not so much because of what is said, but what isn't said.

Two points in particular; nowhere in this story do we hear how the miracle actually happened. It's like one of those cheap BBC action shows – right at the bit where something spectacular is about to go down, the camera pans away because the Beeb can't afford the special effects. One moment Jesus is blessing bread and fish, and the next it's all over.

And there's the second point. Usually in the gospels when Jesus performs a miracle he has quite a lot to say about it afterwards. Either he's giving instructions to the miracle recipient about keeping it all quiet or taking up their mat, or he's going into details with the disciples about what just happened and why. In this case though, nothing. And that's really quite surprising, because this would have been an eye-catching miracle.

Many people believe that the next world war will be fought over water. While we in this place enjoy plenty of it, and sometimes too much, in two thirds of the world there isn't enough fresh, uncontaminated drinking water for everyone, and that makes it a valuable commodity worth fighting, and dying, for. In the first century Roman Empire though it wasn't water that they were fighting for, it was food. One of the greatest challenges facing the Romans was finding and distributing enough food to feed the empire, and by the time of Jesus several wars had already been fought over it. Now, here comes a simple man from backwoods Galilee who can apparently take a couple of fish and a bit of bread and feed up to ten thousand people. That's a miracle, and yet none of the gospels make that big a deal about it. Why not? Well the answer I think is in the rest of the story.

Jesus has recently heard about the death of John the Baptist, which has quite naturally saddened him, so he goes off for some time alone. The crowds have other ideas though so they follow him, and when Jesus sees them we're told he had compassion for them – his heart was moved – and he goes back to healing their sick.

The day's getting on a bit and the crowd is still quite big and the disciples, quite rightly noting that they are in fact in the middle of nowhere, suggest to Jesus that this might be a good point to send the people off to find some dinner, but Jesus says, 'they don't need to leave – you feed them.' To which the disciples respond, 'we don't have enough.'

This is where we find one of the points behind the miracle in this story. What we encounter here is an underlying narrative arc – do you like that?

[arc]

I'm going to throw in the occasional technical expression because it makes me sound smart. In this underlying narrative ark – the ongoing theme that flows through multiple chapters – what we are discovering is that the disciples just aren't getting it. If we look at everything that's gone before, we've had miracles and we've especially had a whole series of parables, all talking about things like a farmer who sows his seeds with grand extravagance on dirt and rocks alike, and a women who mixes enough flour to back an immense amount of bread, and a pearl of great value, and so on and so forth – all of this points to one things, God, and by extension Jesus, is more than generous, gives in abundance and always has enough. In a few chapters time we'll get another feeding story – 4 thousand this time – and again, despite this story today, the disciples don't believe everyone can be fed. They just don't get it, which is one of the points of today. And we should be able to understand that.

[Horn of Africa]

How do we respond to pictures like this? 12 million people starving in the Horn of Africa, what can we do? Can we save them all? We don't have enough.

[Norway]

What about this? The tragedy of so many young lives, brutally taken. What can we do? How do we prevent something like this ever happening again? We don't have the answers.

[Enough] We don't have enough.

Jesus, though doesn't accept that answer. 'We've got 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish' the disciples say – at least in Matthew's version they're not taking some little boy's lunch! So Jesus takes the bread and the fish, and he looks up to heaven, and he blesses them and he breaks them – much like what we'll be doing later, only without the fish – and this is the sort of table prayer that Jews everywhere would have recognised. Then he gives the pieces to the disciples, and the disciples feed the crowd.

They had enough. In fact they had more than enough. I just want to focus for a moment on the baskets.

[spuris]

The Greek word for the kind of basket basket we hear about in this story is σπυρίς – spuris – and what you probably don't need to know, but I'm going to tell you anyway, is that there are several different Greek words for basket and this one describes a large basket, or a hamper. It's the same word used for the basket in which Paul is let down over the wall at Damascus in Acts 9, so these are big baskets, and there are 12 of them. Why? Numerologists will tell you all sorts of stories about why 12 is significant – there are 12 tribes of Israel and so on – but what I think is this. There were 12 disciples and 12 baskets, so every disciple gets a basket and as each and every one of them wanders round collecting the leftovers what they all learn in a bold and graphic way is that they did have enough, and even more than enough.

[all ate]

“And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full.”

This isn't, I believe, a story about Jesus performing a miracle – or not directly anyway. This is a story about Jesus' followers performing the miracle with him.

[Rublev]

In Andre Rublev's famous icon of the Holy Trinity there are several elements that commentators have liked to comment on. Not the fact that they are gathered around a table. Note how all of them are facing the viewer, drawing us in. But note also that between the front two characters there is a space.

To throw in another slightly technical term, what happens in our gospel reading this morning is a 'participatory miracle'. Jesus provides the direction and the blessing, but what we really need to recognise is that it's the disciples who provide the food and feed the people – it's Jesus and his followers together who make possible the impossible – and in doing so those followers take their place at the holy table too.

I suspect we all feel like the disciples sometimes, as individuals and as parishes. I know that as the diocese highlights the missional church focus, and reminds us all that the church only really discovers who it is when it participates in the mission of God, it's easy for it all to become quite overwhelming. There aren't many of us, we're old, we're tired, we don't have enough.

“And all ate and were filled.”

I want to invite us to sit for a while and reflect on what that might mean for us. And if you want to, you might like to note on the piece of paper you were given the answer to this question:

[What do I/we have to offer?]

I want to encourage you think about the question in terms of your parish, and if you're not currently involved with any of our five parishes we have forms you can fill out and we'll waive the joining fee if you hand them in today ... just kidding. Feel free to answer for yourself individually if you prefer. And once you've written your answer you might want to put it in this basket. It's not a spuris, and there aren't 12 of them, but one will be enough.

And as we do that we hear the words of today's Psalm, Psalm 17 ...