

SERMON FOR TRINITY 9 | 29.07.2018

Food. Glorious food.
We're anxious to try it.
Three banquets a day;
our favourite diet
Just picture a great big steak -
fried, roasted, or stewed.
Oh food! magical food!
wonderful food, marvellous food!

When Mark Lester stood in the middle of the orphanage hall 'asking for more' in the 1968 film version of the musical, Oliver, everyone watching instantly felt a connection. Food isn't just about keeping body and soul together, at its best it is one of life's greatest delights, with the power to do more than just keep us alive. In an article celebrating the 70th birthday of the NHS recently, there was unlimited praise for the medical treatment they had received in hospital – but a sad footnote went on to say that their recovery would have been a good deal quicker if the food they had been given had been worth eating...

For the next few weeks the Sunday Gospel readings from St John's Gospel all feature Jesus talking about food - and today's story is one of the most familiar: the time when Jesus fed 5000 men (plus any number of women and children), up into the hill country of Galilee, miles away from Jerusalem where so much of his ministry was centred.

Of course we know this story very well from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke: Jesus had been teaching the crowds all day and at tea time everyone is starving. How are they going to be fed when they are miles away from any shops?

But this version in John's Gospel is different. In fact it looks as if Jesus had been trying to escape from the crowd not spending time with them as in the other versions. And, as we have just heard, Jesus seems to want to feed them as soon as he sees them and he picks on Philip (who gets no mention in the other Gospels), asking where they can buy bread for this great mass of people? And, not surprisingly, Philip talks money – big money: two hundred shillings was a fortune - and still wouldn't be enough to give the crowds more than a bite each.

But perhaps Andrew has a solution? After all he has come up with a child who has five small barley loaves (poor quality even by local standards), and a couple of dead looking fish.

Let's not rush along too fast here. This is not the run of the mill telling of a story about a picnic: this is St John – and every detail, every symbol, counts. He was writing fifty years and more after Matthew, Mark and Luke had write their Gospels and the Early Church is already familiar with the bare bones of this event. What St John want to do is to bring something fresh to our attention.

Already we have heard in the 1st Reading about how Elisha fed a hundred men with twenty barley loaves provided by someone else – and they, too, doubted whether there would be enough to eat.

What St John seems to be doing here in this version is to draw us away from the hillside and the crowds of hungry people - and into Church. Look how familiar the shape of the action is: Jesus tells the disciples to tell the people to sit down. He then give thanks and the food is shared out among all those who were there – just as it would have been at any community meal. Even the boy with his loaves and fish is mirrored at every Mass: bread and wine are brought up from the back of Church in readiness for the blessing and the sharing. And like the barley loaves, what we bring to God may be the best we can manage but it really isn't up to much...

But it is enough because, as when the water is turned into wine at the wedding at Cana, all those who saw what happened realized that Jesus was the prophet who had come to transform the world.

So is that it: a story which teaches us about our usual Sunday worship?

What about the big questions. What about our questions about whether there are such things as miracles; what about the unfairness that comes from the fact that Jesus seemed to feed people on some occasions but at other times he just disappears?

It is at this point that we have to remember the words at the end of St John's Gospel: *Jesus did many other things which are not recorded in this book but these are given to us that you may hear and believe.*

So we have some work to do if we are to get the most out of these occasions. So let's take a slight change of gear.

In 1905, a German, Max Weber, wrote a short book called ‘The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism’. In it he asked why all the business leaders and owners, plus the bulk of higher skilled workers and managers, were Protestant as opposed to Catholic – and why Protestants were generally better educated.

His answer was that Protestants showed a special tendency to creating wealth that was less focused on the gain of comfort than in ‘wealth creation’, an outlook based on increased productivity and better use of resources. Long after all needs had been met, the Protestant capitalist did not rest, forever seeking greater profits.

In Protestantism there is a love of hard work for its own sake, a desire for orderliness, punctuality and honesty, a hatred of time-wasting through socializing, idle talk, sleep, sex or luxury (“every hour lost is lost to labour for the glory of God”), a desire for the control of one’s emotions, an aversion to spontaneous enjoyment.

Still there is a view that the Protestants in northern Europe perform better than the Catholics in places like Spain and Italy.

But what has emerged recently, in studies in the universities of Bristol and Tennessee, is that those with no faith are now emerging as the ones who are most prosperous. In a study of 109 countries in the 20th century, economic growth is more obvious in those countries which are becoming more secular and less religious. And the opposite is apparently also true: where religion has grown (ie in Nigeria) there is a fall-off in wealth.

To which one can only ask this question: is having a lot of money in the bank and being materially comfortable the principle aim in life?

And in answer those with the gift of faith return to this story in St John. The crowd has done nothing to deserve a meal and yet as soon as Jesus sees them, his automatic reaction is to ask, *how are we going to feed these people?*

And in the face of his disciple’s questions about how they could ever afford to give even a little, Jesus encourages Andrew to take what little he has and to hand it over to God.

And the result? I am no Greek expert but the terms used in St John suggests that the use of the word basket is a very precise, controlled form of collecting the left-overs, quite unlike the Gentile habit of simply throwing the scraps to the dogs who hung around the tables, endlessly looking for something to eat.

In other words, we are encouraged to read this story as part of another way of looking at life. Instead of believing that we can do everything for ourselves - with the pressure that every *hour of work lost, is lost to labour for the glory of God* – we are being encouraged to take the little we have and to offer it directly to God, open to the fact that he can – and so often does – transform that into more than we can ever dream of.

That is why food is at the heart of our worship and at the heart of our Christian fellowship. As Maria and I experienced at a wedding reception yesterday afternoon, it was in the very act of eating and drinking together – with friends as well as with total strangers - that so much good emerged. The generosity and genuine fun that flowed from that occasion was truly life-giving. By the end we were exchanging names and addresses with people we had never met before, bound together in extraordinary ways by that common meal.

True wealth doesn't lie in the vaults of banks. At the heart of the Taize Community (which has brought us the wonderful musical chants we are using at the 10am Mass today) is the sharing – by literally thousands of young people - of simple, basic food. And out of that have come conversations that have filled people with the kind of happiness that has nothing at all to do with what they own.

Jesus took the loaves and fish and he fed a crowd. Jesus takes our bread and wine and does the same: he builds us into a community of love which can and does so much more than create a healthy bank balance. We are made new, we are filled with hope, we are given the confidence and grace to look after people less well off than us. We are fed so that we see the Kingdom of God growing here among us. *And If we eat this bread, we will truly 'live'.*