

SERMON FOR TRINITY 6 | 16.07.23

Isaiah 55: 10-17; Romans 8: 1-11; St John 6: 1-13

Talking this week to someone who has just returned to the Church, we were sharing our surprise at just how powerful so many of the biblical stories still are. Yes, we have heard many of them hundreds of times before but they still have the power to surprise us and to take us closer to the mind of God. Fr Stephen and I were talking about last Sunday's story of the Sower and the apparent waste of so much good seed. Today Jesus takes us to the barren shores by the Lake of Galilee at Passover time and to the dire situation when five thousand have nothing to eat.

And in so doing I want to suggest we change the way we read this story. Because I suspect we tend to see it as a tale about 'them'. We read it as: because of all his signs and wonders, the crowd were following Jesus wherever he went. Here he goes up the side of a lonely mountain – and they still follow him. But they hadn't thought about food so to make sure they don't starve Jesus asks his team – and Philip in particular – how are we going to feed them all? And Philip knows that a crowd of this size is going to need huge amounts and so he throws up his hands in the air and does a rough calculation: half a year's wages and then they still wouldn't get much each. And we don't have that sort of money either...

The crucial line for me is: *He said this to test Philip for he himself knew what he was going to do...* It is the line that echoes the opening reading from Isaiah: *for as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return until they have watered the earth, so shall my word be: it shall not return to me empty but it shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

Which is another way of saying: God knows what he is going to do. He knows what has happened, what is happening and what will happen. Even up a mountain with 5000 hungry people.

But God's will, God's plan, only reveals itself when we cooperate. *Andrew said to Jesus, There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two small fish. But what are they among so many people? Dead right Andrew! They aren't even worth thinking about in the face of a crowd this size! Jesus said, make the people sit down...*

If we make this story into an historical event, and talk about it as being a wonderful party where Jesus does a miracle, years ago, this story has very little value. It is a bit like listening to someone telling you that 'someone they know won the lottery'. Really?!

But if - as we explored with our seven new Eucharistic Ministers this week - the idea that the Bible way of remembering is to invite us to imagine that we are there too – we were at the Crossing of the Red Sea, we were at the Last Supper for example – then we are up there on that barren mountainside too. We are among the hungry ones looking for help because we are far from home. This isn't just about 'them' it is about 'us'. That is the power of the Bible. It always includes us into the narrative.

And if this story is about us, then: When were we stuck and in need of God's help? What happened? What did we have which was the equivalent of the five barley loaves and two small fish? And what did we make of God's help when it came?

AND were we able to see the truth in Isaiah's words: *nothing that God says will ever be wasted. Like the rains, it will do its job?*

So often we live with the working assumption that everything is down to us: unless we do it, it won't get done. Surely prayer is for the desperate – when everything else has failed! We live within our means so that, if we only have the equivalent of five barley loaves and two small fish, we don't go trying to feed five thousand people with it.

And the reason for this is because, by and large, we have enough to do the limited things we want to achieve.

This week a new Director of Doctrine has been appointed in Rome. His name is Victor Fernandez and he is a very bright cookie indeed. And he wrote this: *To fully understand anything we need to listen to those who are considering the challenges of life from a different place. Those who grew up in poverty 'see' things we miss: those who are suffering in the midst of war or those who have lost a child, for example, see things that others cannot easily understand. But these experiences are a source of real knowledge, not because they close minds or make us prejudiced but because they help us to grow in ways that will enable us to move forward.*

The crises of our lives are often very real. And painful. But they are there to invite us to look beyond ourselves and our own resources. That little boy wasn't going to go hungry; his mum had packed up enough for him and if he kept it to himself, he would have done nicely, thank you. But with God's help that small packet of food was able to feed an army...

When Philip cooperates with Jesus he and that little boy have to let go of the thing that they could control: now they are poor too because the food is no longer theirs. Having entrusted their precious (but tiny) resource, they are in a different place: they are as hungry as the other 4,998.

And it was in their willingness to see things from the crowd's point of view – that the miracle was able to take place. Philip couldn't sort the crisis out, only God could do that: *his word would not return empty but would achieve its purpose.*

Two thousand years later we read this story in the hope that we can see differently: if I 'let go and let God', what will he be able to achieve through me? If I close my eyes and hold tight to those five barley loaves and two tiny fish, what won't get done?

When we feel we have nothing and want to hold onto what we have, that is the time for prayer: time to let go and trust God.