

## Trinity IX (Proper 12) Year B 2018

If you are of a certain age and attended Sunday School as a child, you may remember that when you attended you would be given a stamp depicting a Biblical story which you would stick into a book. The pictures were obviously based on paintings by a particular artist and were very attractive in that rather old-fashioned way! When I became Vicar, a friend gave me a fridge magnet with a depiction of the boy holding a plate with the loaves and fishes in front of Jesus. The modern addition is a speech bubble from Jesus saying, 'No, Mine was the herb-crusted cod with a rocket and parmesan salad!'

This is not to take the account we have just heard in vain, but we will think more about the richness of this passage in a moment. First a little diversion. You may remember that we have a three-yearly cycle of Sunday Gospel readings, using Matthew, Mark and Luke, and that we are currently in the Year of Mark. He provides our Gospel readings throughout most of the year. However, because Mark's is the shortest of the Gospels we take time-out during the summer to explore John Chapter 6 on four consecutive Sundays. John 6 is not only the longest complete sequence in John's Gospel, but one of the most theologically intense chapters in the whole book. At its heart is one of those phrases with which John punctuates the book to enable us to reflect with theological insight into what faith in Jesus Christ means.

***'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'* John 6: 35**

This powerful verse is key to understanding two major things about our faith which John uses the whole chapter seeking to elucidate.

- First, faith. Faith in the overwhelming presence of God made known in the face of Jesus Christ.
- Secondly, our connectedness not just with God, but also with each other as part of the Body of Christ, together with the Eucharist as a strengthening of this double connectedness.

First, Faith. We heard the account of Elisha telling the servant from Baal-shalishah that the offering of the first fruits of the harvest, the twenty loaves and fresh ears of grain, will be more than enough to feed a hundred people, as indeed it proves to be. It comes from a sequence of stories set in the time of famine, in which the Prophet displays the wisdom of God, and provides sustenance to those who are hungry. Is this a spiritual hunger? It certainly has more a sense of Elisha leading people on a journey of faith. The offering of the first fruits has come from a pagan town - Baal-shalishah – yet deemed acceptable.

If we compare this to the Feeding of the Five Thousand, we see an amplification of the sense of the overflowing grace of God revealed in the face of Jesus Christ at the scene on a Galilean hillside. The four Gospels provide us with six accounts of Jesus providing food for thousands of people. All six have a rare coherence between the Synoptic Gospels and John so we know that it is a particularly significant concept for the early Christian communities. Add to this the number of times Jesus describes the Kingdom of God as a wonderful banquet to which all are invited without reservation, then we can see that the feeding of a

multitude seems to foreshadow the Kingdom Life itself. I think too that we can link this with the way in which the feeding points towards the central act of worship for Christians – the gathering around the table of the Lord; the Eucharist itself a sacramental foreshadowing of the divine end-game of hospitality of the Kingdom - our resting place at the heart of God's Love.

If you look at the account, note that it is set as Passover draws near. John uses the great Pilgrim Festivals of Judaism to punctuate the Gospel. He also wants us to remember that at the opening of the Gospel John the Baptist has called Jesus 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.' He is the Paschal Lamb who feeds all who turn to him. However, look at the anxiousness of Philip when surrounded by a hungry crowd. He worries about money and purchase! Jesus instead talks of what is to hand when Andrew points to the boy with the loaves and fishes. The narrative moves on as Jesus instructs the disciples to make the crowd sit down – there is an expectation that all will be well. The grassy hillside draws to the mind the opening of Psalm 23 – *The Lord's my shepherd – he makes me lie down in green pastures*. The Good Shepherd then feeds his flock to overflowing – the twelve baskets alludes both to this overflowing grace of God, but also to the twelve apostles who will eventually themselves become signs of the Kingdom.

However, John wants us to see how rocky a path discipleship of faith can be. The clamouring crowd experience this sign and try to seize Jesus and make him king – John wants us to understand that they can't see beyond the salmon sandwiches! Later in the chapter, many fall away because they won't allow themselves to be led on a journey of faith – they just want signs. Does that sound like the world in 2018?

Then the account of the disciples terrifying encounter on the Sea of Galilee. Again, it is not some magical sign to impress. It is unadorned Faith. Jesus says, '**It is I,**' - John uses the Divine name of God and intimately binds it with the Son. The moment they accept him in the boat – receive him in faith – then they are safely at the shore. In him is to be found lasting and real peace from the storms of life, because Faith talks of constancy, and the identification of God with humanity through the journey of life which Jesus makes **with** and **for** us. At this point the Apostles only have a partial understanding, because the fullness of faith can only be known through the whole passage of Christ's journey.

So what of the Eucharist and the sense of our place as part of the body of Christ? The beautiful passage from Ephesians gives us an understanding of our connectedness both to the Holy Trinity and to each other. Paul says that he wants each one of us together with the whole people of God – the saints - to comprehend the depth of the love of Christ '*that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*' (v.19) This underlying sense of Love Paul describes this love in terms of 'breadth and length and height and depth,' in other words all-encompassing.

This love is expressed within our humanity by Jesus through giving himself wholeheartedly for each of us to identify with us. He is our example, and this sense of self-giving is at the heart of our discipleship as Christians and in our unity with one another. Paul says this in Romans: '*For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same*

*function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us. (Romans 12: 4-6).*

This, of course, is the antithesis of modern culture and the cult of self-fulfilment and self-obsession. You only have to pick up a paper or read on line, watch the television or any other mode of the transmission of news, to know that we live in a Christophobic society. And this is where we are called to be absolutely counter-cultural; to say that actually, we have the knowledge of the way in which life can be lived to the **fullest**; we can point to a way of life which transforms people with the understanding that they are **never** alone and that they are **loved** beyond measure.

Whenever you approach the altar where you meet and are fed by the one who is the Bread of Life, always come with, in the words of a woman priest who I admire, 'an attitude of gratitude.' You **receive** the Body of Christ, and you **are** a precious part of the Body of Christ.



The Feeding of the 5,000 (mosaic 1315-1351) - Church of the Holy Saviour, Chora, Istanbul

## **2 Kings 4: 42-end**

<sup>42</sup> A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, 'Give it to the people and let them eat.' <sup>43</sup> But his servant said, 'How can I set this before a hundred people?' So he repeated, 'Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, "They shall eat and have some left."' <sup>44</sup> He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.

### **Ephesians 3: 14-end**

<sup>14</sup>For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, <sup>15</sup>from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. <sup>16</sup>I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, <sup>17</sup>and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. <sup>18</sup>I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, <sup>19</sup>and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

<sup>20</sup>Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, <sup>21</sup>to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

### **John 6: 1-21**

**6** After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>2</sup>A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. <sup>3</sup>Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. <sup>4</sup>Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. <sup>5</sup>When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' <sup>6</sup>He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. <sup>7</sup>Philip answered him, 'Six months' wages<sup>[b]</sup> would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' <sup>8</sup>One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, <sup>9</sup>'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?' <sup>10</sup>Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they<sup>[c]</sup> sat down, about five thousand in all. <sup>11</sup>Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. <sup>12</sup>When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.' <sup>13</sup>So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. <sup>14</sup>When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'

<sup>15</sup>When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

<sup>16</sup>When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, <sup>17</sup>got into a boat, and started across the lake to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. <sup>18</sup>The lake became rough because a strong wind was blowing. <sup>19</sup>When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the lake and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. <sup>20</sup>But he said to them, 'It is I; do not be afraid.'

<sup>21</sup>Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land towards which they were going.