

## Trinity VIII Year A 2020 *(Proper 13/18 OT)*

Have you the memory of a meal which formed part of an important milestone in your life? I have some very dear friends; whose son has an extraordinary memory of what was eaten when or where at such moments. I fear I tend to remember such occasions when, for instance, the Lobster Bisque was off! Now this might seem flippant when we approach the Feeding of the 5,000 of our Gospel reading, but I wonder how many of those present appreciated the gift Jesus offered on that occasion beyond the act of eating together. On the face of it, we have a straightforward miracle – one recorded with varying details in all four Gospels, but there is a far richer meaning to be discovered without delving too far.

Many theologians like to point to the similarities to the institution of the Eucharist, and it is true that Matthew uses the same words ‘he blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples,’ - plural here, and singular at the Last Supper. There is no doubt that Matthew wants us to pick up that the feeding of the crowd becomes a personal one. However, there is another gift for us in this account - the display of compassion by the Lord. Just think of the sequence; Jesus has heard of the ghastly death of John the Baptist at a quite different feast, he withdraws to a deserted place but is pursued by the crowd who can’t keep away from him, so powerful is his message. Yet when he saw them, *‘he had compassion for them.’*

There is little doubt in my mind that Matthew, painting a picture of this great crowd in a deserted place with no provision, also wants us to remember the Children of Israel and their journey through the wilderness from slavery to freedom. There, you will remember, things began to go awry because of hunger. Moses and Aaron begin to receive the sharp end of the taunts of the people until God provides Manna – the Bread from Heaven for the people in abundance. (*Exodus 16*) Now, here, the people are fed by the one who is the very Bread of Life himself. God in the midst of his people in the face of Jesus Christ.

The compassion displayed at the heart of this account is Jesus’s gift to each one of us to share with him. In him, God offers a new, unbreakable covenant of compassion and grace, calling us to share in its overflowing into the world. Just observe the markers Jesus lays down. He is virtually pursued by the crowd, and although they are not his responsibility, he doesn’t send them away. We are reminded of his reaction earlier in the Gospel, *‘When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.’* (9: 36) Jesus responds to their needs offering compassionate leadership.

This is something we can emulate in so many ways within our lives; indeed, our God-given and Christ-like compassion and empathy are marks of our discipleship. They could be serving God in specific ministry or work within parish life – even in these strange times. They could be manifested in offering leadership within the community or questioning the norms of everyday life. There are many politicians who are committed to bringing Christ-like compassion into decisions at local, national or even international levels, but there is always room for more who speak for the voice of the crowd rather than the mob. However, this compassion and empathy also may just involve a quiet word with a friend who suffers, or a helping hand in a situation where people are struggling.

In our Gospel reading Jesus responds to physical need – sustenance for the hungry. We too are able to reach out in such a way. Many will know that Rebecca Anderson, a member of our church community, appealed for breakfast goods for the Bewbush Academy, one of the poorest schools in Crawley. Children were going hungry in many cases because their parents live chaotic lives. The response from our church has been overwhelming, both in terms of boxes of Cherrios, cartons of milk, teabags and those other items asked for, but also in financial terms. Rebecca's team can now carry this scheme through the summer holidays and into the autumn.

The knowledge that in one of the richest countries in the world, such things require action is a clarion call to all of us in responding with compassion to need. Although we are all too ready to demand that government deals with such problems, it is a blunt tool. In our current situation in the midst of a pandemic, the money taps have been turned on. This is absolutely right, yet can't go on forever. There is poverty in our nation; and this is as much poverty of spirit than anything else – this, and the desire to pass the buck. Yet how much more effectively would situations improve on all sorts of fronts, if we, as individuals, reached out. As I have said, children go hungry in our nation mostly because their parents live chaotic lives, many homeless people are on the streets because of mental health issues. We have slavery within the nation – actual slavery. Our prisons are places from which few emerge rehabilitated. The list goes on. How much more effective things tend to be a grass-roots level. Lives can be transformed with not much more than compassion and kindness.

This sounds like a rosy picture, and there is no doubt that response varies. We understand this from the account today. Although the generosity of God is displayed to this huge crowd, how many of them will stand at the foot of the cross at the end of the day? Jesus gives with overflowing generosity. Our compassion is to emulate him - it requires no reward – we are sharing Christ in what we do. It is the other person's choice in terms of response.

In the wondrous vision the Prophet Isaiah offers us, we are offered the food and drink of the Kingdom to sustain us, and in partaking of this we are told that God will provide for those who trust in him. This means that we do not wait for miracles as a solution to situations like those I have enumerated.

In Christ we are truly fed and called to respond with compassion to need, drawing others into the Kingdom Life. Isaiah says that in doing so, we are glorified as a Holy People, a humble people, who reveal the compassion and love at the heart of our Faith - knowing that in Christ all hungers are truly satisfied.



*Feeding of the 5,000 – Melani Pyke (b.1980)*

### **Isaiah 55: 1-5**

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

### **Romans 9: 1-5**

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen.

### **Matthew 14: 13-21**

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.