

Reflection for Pentecost 9 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

Imagine it's time for the main meal in a fairly well off home in 1st century Palestine. The guests are reclining on couches, which are arranged on three sides of a square around a low table. Each couch is provided with cushions on which the left elbow of each person rests, the right arm remaining free. It's a generally relaxed, happy occasion with guests always washing their hands before the meal. In customary fashion all of the guests eat from a communal dish - a large pottery container filled a mixture of meat and vegetables and placed on the table in the center of the couches. As the meal concludes the grace is pronounced and then, once again, the guests wash their hands again before leaving.

Communal meals are an important part of life: by gathering in this way, we are drawn together, and our sense of belonging is underlined. Something very true in the time of Jesus, and not lost on the writers of both the Old and New Testaments, meals, or the image of meals providing many key backdrops.

This Sunday's gospel is one of Jesus' miracles the feeding of the five thousand, the only miracle that is recorded in all four of the Gospels; and at its very heart lies a communal meal, not a formal meal, more a large picnic, but one in which those who have gathered to hear Jesus were brought together.

It is a miracle we are all so familiar with, and is remembered in a simple yet beautiful mosaic at the Church of the Multiplication at Tabgha by the shoreline of Lake Galilee. What thought should we take from this narrative?

Firstly, we see a clear example of Our Lord's love and compassion for those he came to minister to. Over the last few weeks, our readings from St Matthew's gospel have reminded us of the way Jesus taught through parables. Now, Jesus follows those words up in actions that reflect kingdom values, compassion, and love.

As the narrative begins, Jesus is taking a boat trip to a solitary place. He wants to be alone, to pray and reflect away from the crowds. Yet, instead of solitude as the boat pulls ashore he is confronted by a large group of people. Rather than frustration at losing those moments of solitude, Jesus is filled with compassion for them, he ministers to them, and he heals the sick.

Here's a practical illustration to us, of his love and commitment to his mission and ministry: maybe also a challenge to us, in a world that can at times be self-centered. Jesus, as we see time and again, is not focused on himself but rather on others.

As evening approaches, (*the word used for the evening being one that is flexible referring to any period from mid-afternoon to just before sunset*), his disciples, thinking about the mundane and practical things of life, become concerned about the needs of the crowd, and suggest that Jesus should send them to the local villages to buy food.

Again we see Jesus' compassion as he turns to the disciples and says, *"They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."*

Jesus is wanting to welcome, not to turn away - to meet the needs of those who come to him, both spiritual and physical, and he invites his disciples to be part of that by preparing a meal from their resources. As they search their bags, all they can come up with is five loaves and two fish - pitifully inadequate for the job in hand.

So often we find ourselves in the same position. We look at a situation, we see the need, but rather than focusing on God, we only see what little we have. We need to take seriously Jesus' words *"Bring them here to me."* We need a positive approach to giving to God because what those disciples were about to witness was the generosity of God when they gave what little they had to him. Offering those loaves and fishes, as the power of God moved, 5000 were fed with more left over than they started with. That is the wonder of God at work.

In conclusion, look at the miracle itself; Jesus, by feeding that multitude has not only turned compassion and love into action, he has also indirectly made known who he is.

Matthew as you may recall, is writing his gospel for predominately Jewish readers, for whom the coming of the Messianic age would be one in which they looked forward to seeing a return of the bread of heaven - God's gift of manna, (*Exodus 16*). Here in this remote place, Jesus provides bread for so many and, in the action of breaking that bread, he is making a statement – He is the Messiah. The Messiah will usher in the day of salvation, and invite those present to participate in the messianic banquet, as they are part of the messianic community.

As Christians, this story also has echos of the Eucharist and its liturgy - the offering of bread, the thanksgiving over it, the breaking of bread before the invitation to come and receive what God has provided.

Those in front of Jesus were hungry in a physical sense, They needed sustenance for the journey home. At the Eucharist we, too, gather to be fed in a spiritual sense - for our spiritual journey and work for Christ. We need to come to the one who is the bread of life and longs for us to be part of his gathered community.

The feeding of the 5000, probably the most famous of Jesus' miracles, is one that challenges us to look with compassion, to offer to God what we can, and to remember that in the meal Jesus himself gave us, we celebrate our unity in Christ.