

## Reflection for Pentecost 9 by Megan Cambridge

They used to say knowledge is power but sometimes it doesn't always feel like that. We are constantly bombarded by information. Every day we hear on the news, and see on the numerous appeals by aid agencies, many seemingly hopeless situations. Electronic media brings into our lives knowledge about weather, economics, politics, wars and famines. We can even watch one programme whilst breaking news scrolls across the bottom of our screen. These situations are so big and our ability to effect change seems impossible. In the face of so much knowledge there is the temptation to feel paralysed instead of empowerment and to ask 'what can we do?'

In our own lives the issues that confront us or our loved ones can seem so big that we don't know where to start or how to get where we need to go. So overwhelmed with the size of our problems we lose sight that we are all in a boat together, rowing towards the other side of the sea, apparently without Jesus only to find he's there ahead of us, but not in the way that we were expecting. We get stuck in thinking that we're in the boat rowing and not getting anywhere. Our reading from the gospel today has something to tell us about apparently hopeless situations. There's another way of looking at overwhelming problems. In the first part of our reading Jesus' first thought is for those who are hungry but the disciples saw a caterers' nightmare. How could they feed so many and where on earth would they get so much food and the money to buy it at such short notice? Philip said, 'For everyone to have even a little, it would take more than two hundred silver coins to buy enough bread.' We are told very clearly the hopelessness of the situation. All Philip could see was how impossible the task would be. All Jesus could see were people who needed food. We see again and again during Jesus' ministry, when others can only see the difficulty of the situation, Jesus sees the human need.

The feeding of the 5,000 as portrayed in John's gospel speaks to the temptation to shrug our shoulders in the face of such enormous human need. Surveying the great crowd Jesus asks a question to which the disciples speak the despairing truth. Andrew, referring to the meagre bread and fish, asks the rhetorical question 'what are these amongst so many people?' It's easy to look at the sheer magnitude of need in the light of small resources and ask the same question in despair.

'Miracles are always about human impossibility...and His power demonstrated in His love.' In this miracle Jesus has offered us a pattern of how we may approach those things that are too much, too big, too difficult. We start with the most important. We give thanks, we pray. We do that each and every week we meet; we pray for the world, for its needs, for His church, we pray for each other and for those in need. We give thanks. In the 'prayers of the people' we place before God the great needs of humanity. We may find echoing back the words 'what do we have? whatever we have is not enough.' Yet, as our reading shows us the 'not enough' is not the end of the story. When placed in the hands of Jesus, human weakness and finite thinking becomes more than enough.

In 1946 when Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhui (Mother Teresa) came face to face with the masses of suffering and dying people in Calcutta she talks of experiencing the 'call within a call' namely to serve those suffering the most. Her knowledge, her wealth and her wisdom would not be enough to fulfil a calling to the poorest in the world. Yet knowledge of the love of God fuelled the passion of that call and she began the Missionaries of Charity. We know over the ensuing decades how that grew. The meagre resources in the hands of God were multiplied to make a way forward. I know we are not all Mother Teresa and most of us do not find ourselves in such close proximity to such extreme situations but we are aware that all around there is human need and not enough resources. In the face of it, all the resources that there are seem like a drop in the ocean. Yet as this passage vividly portrays, in the hands of Jesus, little can become much, the few can become many and the weak can become strong.

What is the significance to the story of the boy's five loaves and two little fish? Jesus can take the little we have and with His touch can multiply it to meet whatever needs He sees in

and around us...be it gifts, material goods, or whatever we have, He is never limited by our limits.

In reflecting on why John includes this miracle it may well be to show us Jesus' power and to help believe in Jesus as the Son of God. It may be to lead into that discourse on the Bread of Life. It seems to me that it may also be directly for the disciples' benefit. I have heard it described as 'on the job training'. It was preparation for becoming 'fishers of men' with the responsibility for the spiritual feeding with the 'Living Bread' after Jesus had ascended to Heaven. They were not just to be onlookers but participants. Before the miracle they assumed the only way to feed the multitude was to go into a town to buy food, but knew that was impossible, as there was not enough money. He was training them to depend upon Him as their source for every need.

This was a faith experience for disciples overwhelmed with the vastness of the need before them, belittling their resources and on the point of giving up. It's a lesson in trust to hand to God our resources and then take them back to do what He wills. It is the lesson of Abraham offering Isaac, his only son. It is the lesson of Gideon seeing his small but inadequate army whittled down to a pitiful 300. It is an essential lesson in the school of discipleship.

There are some important principles of ministry here too. Our resources are woefully inadequate to meet the need but we place them in God's hands to do what He wishes with them. He in turn blesses them and places them back in our hands, multiplied, more powerful than we could have imagined.

With enough knowledge, trust, faith and with enough love of Christ then these enormous issues will start to be tackled. We don't always know how. There isn't a project plan with a neat deadline date and milestones that need to be met along the way. We can't measure the performance of this sharing of the knowledge of the love of Christ. It is, however, the sharing of this knowledge that is empowering. We know, because Jesus tells us and because we have faith, that in the end all things will be well.