

The Address

By the Revd. Alison Whiting

As I pondered today's gospel reading, I was reminded of one of Milton Jones' musings on the story of the feeding of the 5,000... 'Perhaps some people are reluctant to give up their two fish and five loaves today because they've been in the Church long enough to know that by next week, they could be in charge of the whole of the hospitality ministry for Western Europe' (1)

But on a far more serious note... I would like to invite you to cast your mind back, and try to remember a time of great sadness – perhaps a huge disappointment, or loss. What did you want and need the most? Probably, to hide away and be quiet and reflect, perhaps to pray – and just have some uninterrupted headspace, alone; to simply 'be'. But this place you go to is unexpectedly heaving with people who all want your attention, now. How would you feel? How might you react?

In our gospel, Jesus was doing precisely that; he had just heard about the brutal death of his cousin and colleague, John the Baptist, and he was retreating alone in a boat to a quiet place. But the crowds were following him, and were already waiting for him where he landed. How did Jesus respond? Did he set off again in the opposite direction to try and find somewhere else to reflect? No, he 'had compassion on them and cured their sick' - showing his deep love for the people, irrespective of how he was feeling inside.

There is so much that could be said about this passage. But it was Jesus' compassion that really hit me when I was preparing this sermon.

I was also struck by the similarities between this story, and the Eucharist, which we are about to celebrate. Common to both, Jesus **TOOK** the bread. He **BLESSED** the **BREAD**; he **BROKE** the **BREAD**. He had it **DISTRIBUTED** to all present, and they **ATE** it, and were satisfied. How do we feel having received communion?

There is mystery and miracle; just as the seemingly tiny amount of food satisfied the vast crowd, we too can be satisfied on a different level, after eating the small communion wafer..... What changes in us? How long does it last?

The verses after today's passage, tell us that Jesus DISMISSED the people himself. This Dismissal (the 'Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord') which we have at the end of the Eucharist, is not just a nice tidy way of ending, but a challenging instruction – having been 'fed' spiritually, we are now to 'live' the Eucharist outside the church building in our daily lives during the week. When we reply 'In the name of Christ, Amen' we're making a powerful commitment to this end. In order to have the strength to do this, we need to have been fed – and to keep on being fed.

I love it when there's a clear link between Sunday's Bible readings! The beautiful poetry of Isaiah that we heard this morning echoes this theme of being fed and satisfied on a deeper level.

When it comes to nourishing our souls, as with our bodies, quick, easy, 'junk' food can be so much more tempting! We fit so much into our lives, hoping to find satisfaction, fulfilment and wholeness – yet still often end up with a bit of a nagging emptiness deep inside. This is not peculiar to us in the 21st century though! Isaiah knew how addicted humanity can become to instant satisfaction, asking 'Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?' I do not believe at all that God is anti-material things, but sees that such things can only give us satisfaction up to a point...the novelty may gradually wear off, or the item wear out. On the other hand, God's love for us will never run out or wear out.

What we hunger and thirst for, says a lot about us. Sometimes at work, if I'm speaking with a young person, I ask 'If you had a wish and could change one thing in your life, what would it be?' The answers can be very insightful and tell a lot about the person's situation, hopes and values.

From time to time, I find it helpful to 'return to base' as it were, and ask myself questions like 'Do I hunger and thirst to know God better?' If not, can I discern what's getting in the way? If I do, then how can I do this, here and now?'

And the ways can be surprising; it's doesn't have to be a case of sitting down and engaging in heavy, academic Bible study – unless that is something that particularly

gives you life! But (as I think I may slip into just about every sermon) St Ignatius' notion of reflecting on what gives you 'life', a sense of wonder and of thus feeling closer to God, is incredibly helpful. Of course reading the Bible is important, but maybe a walk by the river, listening to a certain piece of music or gazing at a painting or the night sky, might also take you to a place of 'otherness', and a sense of God. The possibilities are infinite!

So, may we continue to hunger for God, be fed with food that truly satisfies, and so be empowered to live our lives with compassion and love for others.

Ref:

(1) Milton Jones '10 Second Sermons' (2011), DLT