

Sermon on Trinity 9 Proper 12 – 29<sup>th</sup> July 2018

By The Reverend Canon David Hodgson at All Saints Church Wokingham

Gospel reading: John 6: 1 -21

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century British philosopher Thomas Hobbes described human life as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”. As a summary of the experience of the majority of people he was not completely wrong, poor and short for most certainly. Even 200 years later by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century still over 80% of the world’s population lived in extreme poverty – that is they had just enough to survive. By 1981 that had dropped to 44% of the world’s population living in extreme poverty, but now the astonishing reality is that figure has dropped under 10%. Of course, it means 750 million people still today are just surviving and these facts are no cause for complacency about the plight of those people. Quite the reverse in fact, in a situation where there is so much surplus wealth in the world it is scandalous and even more demanding of attention that a relatively small proportion are excluded from it. But nonetheless, as the Dutch historian and writer Rutger Bregman<sup>1</sup> has observed, we are living, to use his phrase “ in an age of biblical prophecies come true” – truly a land of milk and honey – an age of abundance unprecedented in human history.

One of the effects of this is that, again globally speaking, fewer people are going hungry. In 1965 over one and a half billion people, fifty per cent of the world’s population, ate less than 2000 calories a day; now it is about 3% of the world, still 250 million people malnourished, but far less than before; an amazing change considering the doubling of the world’s population in that period. Between 1990 and 2012 more than 2 billion people got access to clean drinking water. We have created the paradise that our forebears could only dream of it seems. Is there a catch?

Well let me turn to the famous miracle of our gospel reading – the feeding of the five thousand. This is probably the most well-known miracle of Jesus, not least because it appears at least once in each of the four gospels.

A large crowd had followed Jesus, John’s gospel tells us, because they had seen the signs Jesus was doing for the sick. The power and compassion of God, focussed in Jesus, was having a wonderful impact on the well-being of the people, especially the most vulnerable and marginalised in society. So the people followed Jesus, up away from the shoreline and the villages and into the mountains, where he had gone to rest with his disciples. Jesus and the disciples had a situation on their hands. The way St John’s gospel describes what happens next, in keeping with John’s approach, is far more than a story exemplifying the compassion of the Lord, though it is that of course.

For St John this is a story which reveals – it is a sign which reveals who Jesus truly is, which reveals the wonder and glory of God, that has come to light in Jesus, that is now in the world because of Jesus. And like all the signs about Jesus in this gospel it is a challenge and an invitation to us the hearers and readers of the gospel to see and to believe what God has done for us and for the world by what Jesus did. Recall how John’s gospel narrated the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus who came to see Jesus secretly at night to ask him about the signs he was doing and where he was from and the metaphor of being born again which Jesus spoke of, much to Nicodemus’ puzzlement. The story of the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand works in a similar way - what John’s gospel wants us the readers to acknowledge is that when it comes to believing and trusting in God’s work in the world, believing God came to us and is with us now in Jesus, then there is a wonder and a mystery here. It is not simply an extension of existing knowledge. To see and to enter into an understanding – a faith and a perspective – that God is working in this world, to see and embrace for ourselves by faith God’s purposes of love, peace and forgiveness, secured by what Jesus did, that is a matter of faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Utopia for Realists (2017)

This I believe is why what happens next as the crowd gathers is that Jesus decides to test his disciple Philip by asking him this question: "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" As Philip rightly saw the situation could not be dealt with by the existing usual way. He might have said, well if there were 5 unexpected guests or even 50 we could pop down to the Co-op and get some bread, as Kathryn did last Sunday at 11am Family Communion (where we use normal bread) when we realised the communion bread rota had fallen over; but feeding five thousand unexpectedly, no way, couldn't afford it. Something different and transformational needed to happen. The exchange between Jesus and Philip serves to show us that point.

But then up pops the boy. Don't you love this boy with his 5 loaves and 2 fishes? What is he like - coming out for the day so well-prepared? Has a solicitous caring mum made him a packed lunch maybe? But it's quite a lot for one boy – more than 2000 calories I'd think - so maybe he was carrying the day's food for a family group. Anyhow the story is what the story is and here's a boy with five loaves and two fishes. What's the verdict of Andrew, the disciple who'd found him? "What are these among so many people?" So here is another part of this story underlining that the usual ways of dealing with the situation are not going to work – in this case the usual way being bring and share.

How many times have you heard this story presented in Sunday School classes and school assemblies as a moral tale – a kind of Christianised Aesop's Fable – about the importance of sharing - how the well-prepared and generous boy opening up his knapsack and sharing his pack-up, inspired everyone else to share too. I must admit in years of ordained ministry I can't pretend I have never told the story for that purpose. And there's nothing wrong of course in telling a story to inspire children to be more generous and share; and which of us haven't used the same story to make different points in different situations? But it's not what the gospel narrative actually says nor is it a story intended to inspire sharing.

The story is told in the way it is to show that the needs of the people cannot be met by existing knowledge and practice. The situation demands transformation. The gospel event invites faith in the power of God to change such a situation; to trust in the reality of God's coming kingdom. Jesus welcomes and invites the crowd into God's hospitality. Jesus took what was available – those few loaves and fishes – though inadequate in terms of previous experience they were not despised thereby, but they transformed the situation in the perspective of faith in God's kingdom.

When everyone in the crowd had eaten as much as they wanted – note the abundance of this transformation; there is nothing austere about God's provision – then twelve baskets of fragments were collected. It's as if there is more left over afterwards than there was to begin. God's power and God's care are not depleted by this provision; it is a source which is never exhausted. Acts of faith and love, even in the face of a demanding situation where all previous responses are no longer valid, cause God's presence and influence to multiply, as did the loaves and the fish, producing an abundance of life.

At the end of the description in St John's Gospel, there is this enigmatic comment in verse 15 – "When Jesus realised that they were about to come and take him by force and make him king, he withdrew again to the mountains by himself". Though the people understood that this miracle was a sign of a new thing which God was working among them – that Jesus was the prophet they had expected God was to send into the world- still their understanding was lacking and their response flawed. They wanted to make him a king on their own terms; the solution to their problems; rather than understand the true character of the kingdom Jesus served. How similar again was this response to that of Nicodemus we heard about in chapter 3 a few weeks ago. He saw that Jesus was different "We know that you've come from God, you could not otherwise perform the signs you are doing." But he lapsed into a confused response when he heard about new birth – questioning in literal ways how anyone can go back to their mother's womb. He failed at first to understand the message that simply by our natural birth into the world we may never search for or truly see the kingdom of God, the reign of love, at work in us and around us. It requires another

birth, the birth in us of faith and the life of the Spirit. So, the crowd members who wanted to make Jesus their king then and there, could see that there was power in him, but had no sense that here was a new reality breaking in upon them, the power of God's kingdom, which changes hearts and so the world in a new way; not simply as a means to expand and extend their own power and influence.

I began with noting with Rutger Bregman that hunger and lack of food had been abolished for all but a small percentage of the world's population; (though scandalously that percentage does include now from time to time members of our own community here in Wokingham, otherwise we would have no need for a foodbank.) In global terms the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand you could say is achieved more than a million times over every day as some 6.8 billion people on earth receive food enough to live. We live in an age of general plenty that former prophets and poets even up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century could only preach and write about but never saw in their lifetimes except within the confines of the courts of short-lived kings and prelates. Many then seem to say now we have no need of faith in God these days, maybe faith in God was a helpful opiate to dull the pain when human life was short and poor; but now we need have only faith in the power of human ingenuity to meet all our needs.

But yet there are deep fissures and divides too in the distribution of the earth's abundance, as I said, made all the more unjust and all the more urgently in need of action to repair because they exist in a world which has the means and the power to remove them. They may be less than 10% but the 750 million people still living in extreme poverty need not be doing so if the world had the combined will to save them; the 250 million people with not enough to eat daily could be fed if the world saw fit to accord urgency to their needs.

And so it is right that Christians and churches, in the name of the compassionate Christ we serve, join with others of compassionate hearts and a thirst for justice to work and to give of our resources to remedy these needs of our fellow human beings; to share this untold abundance with all regardless of creed or country. The story of the feeding miracle of Jesus reminds us and urges us to feed the people as Jesus did.

Yet as I said the story, the gospel, is more than a moral example, important though morality is. And faith is more than a way to get through life when it's tough, to be forgotten when all is smooth. The miracle of the feeding revealed, as the other signs in John's gospel do, that the transforming power and presence of God is with us and in us in Christ. This is the good news and the gift that Christians and the church has to offer the world. And we must offer it boldly and confidently. And though it may appear we live in a world in which abundance has been realised we know too as Rutger Bregman's work also makes clear, we have created a "bleak paradise"; where many suffer anomie, lack of meaning and purpose, and where the abundance we enjoy is destroying the earth's natural ecosystems systems on which it depends. The message contained about Christ in St John's gospel therefore is as powerful and as necessary today as ever it was: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly".

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