

A FEW NOTES ON THE FEEDING OF THE 5000

Matthew 14.13-21

I'll never forget one very wet October day when my cousin in Glasgow telephoned me to say that his brother had been killed in a car crash on the M74 at the age of just 32. He left behind a wife and two young children. As a minister you have to learn to cope with death but the death of a member of your family is something which makes its mark and cuts you to the very core of your being.

Tradition has it that John the Baptist was the cousin of Jesus and John had just been put to death by the evil king Herod in the famous "head of John the Baptist on a plate" incident. How did Jesus feel on hearing the news about his cousin?

Matthew tells us. "When Jesus heard the news about John, he left there in a boat and went to a lonely place by himself." (Matthew 14.13) Jesus, we can assume, was filled with strong and mixed emotions as any one of us would be. Sadness at the death of John, anger for the man (and woman) who had brought this about. And to have his head cut off - there is something about be-heading which is extremely distasteful! He wanted to be left alone, to come to terms with what had happened, to sort himself out. And so he took himself off to a place by himself 'far from the madding crowd' who not infrequently pressed in upon him from every side..

1. They say that there is 'no peace for the wicked' and neither was there any peace for the one we call the messiah! A large crowd, who had come to him for help and healing, had followed him around the side of Lake Galilee on foot, so that when he landed in that lonely spot the crowd were there waiting for him. "They were not to be denied!" as the late Bob Crampsie might have said. How did he feel about that?

I can imagine that some of us might 'blow up' in similar circumstances. Demand our right of asylum. Get back in the boat and sail off in another direction. But that's not what Jesus does.

Matthew tells us that when he saw this large crowd waiting for him - like a very full doctor's surgery - "his heart was filled with pity for them, and he healed those who were ill." (Matthew 14.14)

His heart was filled with pity - not for himself - but "for them." This is tremendously important. A book I was reading recently says that it is equally likely that being bereaved will make some people come more often to church but that some will want to keep their distance. Why? The awkwardness of the situation, perhaps, meeting up with people who don't know what to say or say the wrong thing? How embarrassing! But for Jesus it was never about 'himself' but always about 'others'. If you want to be my follower, he had told his would-be disciples, you have to forget self, pick up your cross, and follow me. Sometimes it's better to get on with things than to dwell on things. Let us be counted among those who, despite the worst that could possibly happen to us, are to be found in church, meeting with

friends and strangers alike week by week.

2. The day passes, the evening comes, and the disciples bring word to Jesus that the crowd -miles from anywhere - are tired and they are hungry.

"That evening the disciples came to him and said, "It is already very late, and this is a lonely place. Send the people away and let them go to the villages to buy food for themselves." But Jesus said, "They don't have to leave." (Matthew 14.15-16)

Very early on in the life of the Christian Church there was a very real problem - or so we can imagine. In 'the days of his flesh' Jesus had been there for them. He had on a daily basis given his followers what they needed most. He had provided them not just with food for their bodies but food for their souls. He had met their deepest need with his teaching. But following his death and resurrection people were asking, now that Jesus has gone from us, who will feed us with what they came to call "the Bread of Life." How will we manage spiritually? Where will we find the food for our souls for which we crave? Is it all over with the death of Jesus? Time to go home? But Jesus says, "They don't have to leave - you yourselves give them something to eat."

It is at this point, you could say, that the ministry of Word and Sacrament was born. That from that day to this the Church has made sure that people's spiritual needs are adequately met by people ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Paul, at one point in his Letter to the Romans asks a very important rhetorical question: "How can they believe if they have not heard the message? And how can they hear if the message is not proclaimed?...faith comes from hearing the message and the message comes through preaching Christ." (Romans 10.14 and 17)

You see, among the many vexing problems facing the Church in Scotland at the present time is a lack of ministers of Word and Sacrament. We are not alone in this and there's small comfort in that! The RC Church in Scotland is finding it even more difficult to recruit priests than we are to recruit ministers of Word and Sacrament. 148 vacant churches (currently) tells its own story! How are the people of Scotland to be fed spiritually now and in the future? In the 70 year history of this church and congregation to the best of my knowledge only one person has gone from here to study for the ministry. By comparison the congregation in which I grew up in Glasgow within a period of a decade had produced half a dozen, myself included! I remember there was a growing realisation that this was what I was meant to do and then, one night, Dr Andrew Heron, in his year as Moderator appeared on TV and said - the Church needs young men and women to come forward as candidates for the ministry of Word and Sacrament

Today its not just about ministers of Word and Sacrament. We are coming to realise in a congregation like ours that it's also of necessity about Youth Ministers and Community Ministers to 'reach those parts that the ministers of Word and Sacrament can't reach!' In this area where there are many young people and where our Church Centre plays host to as many as 6000 people a week we need to be thinking about Youth and Community ministry or

risk failing in our task. So, how about it? Have we ever thought about a career in ministry? And if not, are we yet willing to support in every way we can those who have taken up the challenge and answered the call? Are the people to be sent away feeling hungry or are they to be given something to eat, something that will satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart? "You yourselves give them something to eat."

3. Finally I want you to notice in this story that at the end, after everyone 'had ate and had enough'(Verse 20) then the disciples took up 12 baskets full of "the left-overs." (Matthew 14.20)

This was not the precursor of the American habit when dining out at a restaurant to ask the waiter to put everything in a bag to take home the things that you cant eat - whether for the dog (a "doggy bag") or to be consumed later.

Food was scarce in Palestine - it would have been a terrible waste not to gather up good and, for some, much needed food.

John Pridmore says, "The context of the feeding of the 5000 is not what was happening in his world but what is happening in ours!"

We have to remember the Afghan father who recently sold his 11 year old daughter for \$2000 dollars in order to buy much-needed food for the rest of his hungry family.

We have to take note of the food riots that are happening all around the world- Mexico, Morocco, Uzbekistan, Yemen, Haiti, and Senegal.

And have we yet clocked the doubling of wheat prices on the world markets? The rising cost of bread and , nearer home, the steepest increases in food prices for 14 years?

The disciples gathered up 12 baskets of 'left -overs'

As my mother (and probably yours!) used to say: "Waste not, want not."

We are not yet in a situation of 'rationing' but watching what we buy, what we throw out, what we waste in general every year in life might go a long way to helping a few hungry mouths.