



Sermon for St John's Church Evensong, Sunday 28 July 2024

One of the great joys of ordained - & indeed of local Christian – life, for many of us, is the joy of welcoming children to the rite of Baptism, as well as to Holy Communion & Confirmation.

Next Sunday I will be Baptising, in my Parish at St John's Hills Road, little Alfie (aged one+), as he comes forward, with his parents, and the little he has, to be baptised. Yes, a seed will be planted, which in time will grow & blossom, to the glory of God.

Today in our liturgy, God offers each one of us an invitation, that our lives be transformed too, as we allow ourselves, in faith & love, to be taken, blessed & used by God, as instruments of his ever-abundant love.

Think for a moment of that other little boy, in today's Gospel story, from John– the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 – who offered the little that he had (5 barley loaves & 2 fish) to Jesus. +Think, for a moment, of what happened, and what became of that little boy.

I want you to use your imagination, to picture the scene: a great summer picnic on a hillside in Galilee. Have you got your blankets & hampers ready? It is summertime, after all, and the parks are full of people, all around us, here in Cambridge, incl. at the Folk Festival.

Remember that it was getting late & the crowds, who had followed Jesus around the Sea of Galilee, were hungry & thirsty; just like many people today, are hungry and thirst, because of drought, conflict of famine. They really were desperate to be fed, not only physically, but perhaps spiritually too. Feel the hunger & exhaustion they felt.

And here was this little boy... present (as one of the crowd) at that great summer picnic. So what did he do? Encouraged by the disciples perhaps, this child offered the little he had to Jesus, five barley loaves & dried fish, poor man's food; nothing special).

And what did Jesus do? Knowing the power of God at work in him, Jesus made the people sit down, gave thanks & blessed the food, and distributed the bread & the fish to all who are seated; some 5,000 men, women & children.

Now that's a lot of people! That's larger than the 'Stad de France' in Paris, at the Olympics! That's a serious lot of people. And yet Jesus blessed and broke the bread, and there was enough for everyone. It was a feast and a miracle of abundant life & blessing.

It's a story that had great importance for the first Christians, because we find it in all four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke & John. In fact it's the only story, before the events of Holy Week that all the Gospels have in common. It really is one of the highlights of the entire Gospel. So it must tell us something vitally important...

Today, we can link it – through our readings – with another key passage, from St Paul and his Letter to the Ephesians, which also has a profound insights about what’s going on here.

So let’s look, again, at the story of the five loaves + two fish, which the little boy at the picnic, brought to Jesus.

He was obviously the kind of person who gets noticed in the crowd, the one who stands out. I don’t know if any of you are like that, and can’t help but be noticed! Perhaps you’ve got a particularly bright bag or T shirt, or loud voice, or simply like to be where the action is...

But what matters is what happens next; and this is what I want to relate to, as we think about our life in Baptism and our celebration of Eucharist, Sunday-by-Sunday, both of which enable us to experience a similar blessing today, receiving the life (& the love) that Christ has to offer our waiting world.

There are several different things going on in the story, that I want to reflect on, which speak directly to us. +They’re all connected to the theme of God taking the little we have, the little boy has, and giving us back so much more.

- First, the little boy dares to trust Jesus, and give him the little that he has. This is incredibly important, because unless we dare to trust God with our lives and all what we have (consciously or unconsciously), then Jesus is unable to take it, and bless and multiply it, with so much more. This is what faith is. The little seed that God planted in us, which (in Baptism) we consent to water and grow. We need to dare to discover, encouraged by our friends & church family that God is indeed trustworthy – he is a God of love and mercy and infinite generosity – +then dare to trust Him with our lives & our hopes.
- Second, notice the sheer abundance that results from the little boy’s sharing, as Jesus gives thanks for + distributes the bread and fish. Once we’ve made that decision, and taken that step of trusting Jesus, then who knows what will result. In the Feeding of the 5,000 it was an abundance of feasting and generosity, so that everyone had enough. In our lives, if we give ourselves to God – and believe in our own value & worth – then who knows how greatly God can bless & multiply our gifts & our labours, in whatever sphere of life we serve in, for the good of all.
- Third, alongside Jesus blessing people individually, through the miracle of the multiplying of bread & fish, Jesus blesses us by creating a new community – between people, who had been strangers, but now become friends. In place of what was there before, people isolated and alone, Jesus creates a new community: a miracle of sharing, of solidarity & communion, which is what (above all) the Church is: strangers becoming friends.
- Fourthly, and this is where we connect with the words from Ephesians, as we experience God’s miraculous provision, indeed in our encounter with God – in worship & prayer & daily Christian living – we each enter the amazing flow of God’s power and loving purpose for each one of us. As St Paul writes:

“I pray... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love... so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

Listen to these words of a commentary on this passage, which challenge us to experience that abundant life for ourselves, through our whole-hearted embracing our Baptismal life and everyday faith:

“To be ‘rooted and grounded’ in the love of Christ is to come back to the source of our life. It is God who makes us, with care and individuality, not just in a great and indiscriminate creative splurge, but each one given its name, its particularity.

As we gradually learn to breathe the air of the Holy Spirit, filling our lungs with it, so we learn... that we are made to respond to God. Everywhere we look, we see the power of God at work, in all that he has made and remade, and in all that he has done and is doing.”

In other words, the story reminds us that (through our Baptismal faith, worship, prayer & daily Christian living) our lives are turned inside out, as we experience not scarcity, but God’s abundant, over-flowing love, for all. A love which our weary, anxious & divided world, so much needs.

- Finally. Notice that at the end of the story, we’re told, the disciples gather up all the fragments, which fill twelve baskets. ‘Gather up the fragments left over’ Jesus says, ‘so that nothing may be lost.’ =his reminds us that, as we offer ourselves to God, Jesus gathers up all of our lives, all that we are, in order that nothing may be lost.

No one is unimportant to Jesus – however we sometimes feel – all are precious and important and of infinite value; no one part of our life experience (even the wounded, grieving or mistaken fragments are wasted, as God brings healing, hope & new life, empowering us to offer our whole lives afresh to him, and His broken body in the world.

Yes, here today – as we celebrate the feeding of the 5,000 + share in the eucharist – Jesus takes the little that we have, and blesses it, and gives us so much more.

May we dare to trust him, to share what we have with others, and to be part of that amazing miracle of communion and of abundant life – through his Holy Spirit freely at work in us – which is the Church, a miracle of solidarity & communion, a leaven in the heart of the human family; and knowing that in Him nothing is ever wasted; yes, Jesus gathers up all the crumbs & makes all things new, thro’ the power of His resurrection & for the sake of His undying love - and to Him be glory and praise, for ever and ever. Amen

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