

Homily notes: (live recording at Mass will expand and vary) 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

In the very early days of lockdown, the great worry for many people, as we saw with panic buying, was, would we survive. If we couldn't go out, how were we to live, for we know we can't live without food, without sustenance? We soon realised that essential food shops, supermarkets were open, and on-line delivery was in place, for some only after initial teething troubles.

Food throughout scripture, plays an important part. Commentators on St Luke's gospel, mark out that so much of Jesus' life is going to; sitting at; or coming from a table, a meal. We know that it was lack of food, famine that drove the Israelites into Egypt in Genesis, and a Passover meal of the Exodus that led them out.

God's free grace is the theme today- often symbolised as food: food unearned and unbought, a particularly meaningful image in regions where famine was and still can be an ever present danger.

The prophet Isaiah in 1st Reading is seeking to persuade the dispirited Jews, exiled in Babylon that God will truly fulfil his promise to restore them to their homeland. The prophet has met with severe discouragement; he has been told by the people that God has cast them off and cannot or will not rescue them from Babylon. Having answered their objections, he now calls on them to claim God's promises, however undeserving they themselves are.

In the Psalm of praise, the Lord's unfailing goodness to all his creatures is celebrated, together with the amazing fact that his power over all creation is combined with a care for the wants of each individual. God's goodness is never impersonal or capricious, and the Old Testament key-words, 'steadfast love' and 'truth' show this.

When we listen to the familiar gospel story, the danger can be that we may say to ourselves 'oh, I know this one, and switch off.' Try not to!

All four gospel writers record this feeding, yet at the same time it is clear that none of them are primarily interested in the miraculous multiplication of food, nor did the early Church take it as a sign that their physical needs would always be met.

Jesus was showing that the Old Testament prophecies of God's blessing, symbolised as spiritual food, were now being fulfilled; in particular inviting people to accept his call to be ready for the kingdom of God, so often spoken of as a feast. The early Church was aware that the fulfilment had come in the Eucharist, the never failing source of spiritual food. But reflecting on it; a few things to notice. Matthew places it in the context of Jesus' very human reaction to his cousin, John the Baptist's death.

Jesus, like us in times of difficulty or distress wants to withdraw to a lonely place with his disciples and reflect together. The crowd won't let him. That can happen to us. We need time sometimes just to be quiet and reflect. A reason why I always used to put in newsletter 'talk to God when you come in,' some space for silence. That sometimes was a benefit of lockdown. Jesus takes pity, has compassion for the people. The disciples, when Jesus says 'give them something to eat yourselves,' **BUT** they said, forgetting that Jesus never liked **but**, for it is an excuse word, all we have, bring them to me. Jesus, kind and full of compassion, as the psalmist says.

Compassion means that he stood alongside each person, he felt in their feeling, he hungered in their hungering. He could share the pain of others, because he had been schooled in suffering. He was just then feeling the pain of John the Baptist's callous death.

Compassion has an identical twin called concern. At least they look the same when you first meet them, but when you get to know them they are different in character. Concern is the cold voice of the logical brain, whereas compassion is the warm language of heart and gut. Concern says send the people away. Compassion says there is no need of them to go. Concern takes up causes, whereas compassion picks up people. Concern speaks at a safe distance through a microphone or letters to the editor, or I suppose facebook, or twitter or what else today?

Compassion is at work in the midst of the pain, nursing, feeding, supporting the broken- hearted, and befriending the lonely. Jesus had

compassion on the crowd and he healed their sick. And then, when he challenged his disciples to share the hunger of the people, a miracle of compassion took place.

People ask how God can allow such hunger in the world and such inhumane conditions of life. It will take a huge miracle to feed everybody. The name of the miracle is compassion...the miracle that changes concern into deeds of compassion. Then the monies spent on destructive weapons will be spent on constructive projects. The technology which can reach the moon and beyond it, will stay home to work for the families who have no food and shelter. There is wisdom in the story of the person who prayed in anger to God. 'Why do you allow all this hunger, Lord, if you are kind and full of compassion? When are you going to do something about it? And because their anger in prayer was sincere and full of concern, God answered; 'But I am doing something. Didn't I send you?' Do not send them away...give them something to eat yourselves. And if even twelve people have compassion, a huge miracle can take place.

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