

Homily (notes) from Fr. Paul Andrew
28th July 2024 - 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time
HOMILY: *"There is a small boy here."*

As you all know, this is Year B in our 3 year cycle of Sunday readings, the Year of Mark; but today we have a gap in our Gospel readings from St Mark. His gospel is the shortest of the four, and so for the next month we will be hearing readings from the Gospel of St John, chapter six. This chapter elaborates the teaching of Jesus on the Eucharist, and we begin today with the miracle of the feeding of the crowd with the five barley loaves and two fish and in the coming weeks we shall see how Jesus teaches that he is the Bread of Life and meditate on how we are nourished with the body and blood of Christ himself.

But to today's Gospel, which demonstrates the compassion of Jesus and God's great power and mercy. This is the only miracle found in all four Gospels, which means it is an exceptional event. When Jesus received the news of John the Baptist's killing by King Herod, he and the disciples withdrew by boat to a lonely place by the Sea of Galilee. But thousands of people went after him on foot. So, as he stepped ashore, he saw a large crowd; and he took pity on them and healed those who were sick. But he also recognised their hunger, not only for his words but – more immediately – for food. When the disciples attempted to disperse the crowd because food was scarce, Jesus instructed them to feed the people and then showed them how.

The feeding of the thousands – probably at least ten thousand, if we take women and children into account – is a favourite Gospel miracle for many. But there is some debate today about what the miracle was. Yes, it is possible that Jesus turned a scarcity of loaves and fishes into an abundance of food; but Jesus was not just in the business of feeding others – he was also teaching others how to feed hungry people. Some scholars think it possible that, when Jesus encouraged sharing, the generosity of the small boy prompted others to bring out their packed lunches and share with others in a miraculous outpouring of love. We hear that everybody ate as much as they wanted, with leftovers gathered so they would not be wasted.

In all cultures food is important, not only for survival but as a means of sharing and extending hospitality to one another. Today's gospel is the ultimate in the extension of hospitality. Thousands of hungry people are fed with just five loaves and two fish.

We can picture the scene. A huge crowd milling about Jesus. The apostles on edge because it's late and the Master's talking of providing food for them all; and they know that even six months' wages wouldn't cover the cost. Then Jesus asks Philip, as if to test him, "Where can we buy some bread for these people to eat?" And Andrew replies – is he trying to be smart, we wonder? – but he says, "There is a small boy here with five barley loaves and two fish." Surprisingly, Jesus doesn't laugh at him, or

shake his head in disappointment. Instead, he tells the apostles to get the people to sit down on the grass – it's springtime – while he goes to have a word with the boy. It would be marvellous to eavesdrop on what Jesus actually says to him. It's never easy to part a young lad from his lunch! But that's what happens and before long the vast crowd are being fed on what originally were just a few loaves and fishes, and there's plenty of food left over at the end. The crowd are so amazed they're all for making Jesus a king. Not wanting the apostles to get involved, he sends them off across the lake while he, after dispersing the crowd, goes up into the hills to be with his Father in prayer.

What a story that little boy had to tell his family when he got home that night! And what a challenge he holds for us. We're so easily paralysed into doing nothing by the sheer scale of problems. I hear of hunger in Africa and wonder how my few pounds could make any difference. Nearer home, I'm slow to do small things, because they are so small – like offering a word of sympathy or a helping hand – though they might mean so much to others. But our contributions to the local Food Banks are vitally important, no matter how small that contribution may be. The boy in the Gospel reminds me of another story I heard of another little boy who was walking along the seashore, throwing back into the sea the jellyfish that had been stranded on the beach. An old man passing by asked what he was doing. "I'm saving these fish," he replied. "Saving them?" said the old man. "But there are thousands of them, millions of them. What you're doing can't possibly make any difference!" The little lad said nothing in reply, but as he heaved another jellyfish into the water, he murmured to himself, "It's going to make a heck of difference to this one." If only we were prepared to do the little that's in our power – and leave the rest to the Lord.

Just as we underestimate the value of our small actions, so we underestimate ourselves because we're such small, ordinary people; but however small we are and however meagre our resources, we're all vital to Jesus and his plans, just like the little lad in the Gospel. Jesus doesn't simply tell us these things through today's Gospel, he shows them to us by what he does at this Mass and at every Mass: he speaks to us through the words of the scriptures and he takes a little bread and wine; and then he does something infinitely more wonderful than multiplying them – he changes them into his body and blood so that he can draw us into his embrace in Holy Communion. If that doesn't show that we're special, in fact "specially special", to Jesus, then nothing ever could.

It is here in this gospel that we witness the first sign of what Jesus would do in the institution of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Jesus takes bread, he breaks it and he shares it. In this way he shows his disciples that out of very little, great things can be done.

The feeding of the five thousand reveals Jesus as sharing much more than just the bread – he shares himself. His actions on this particular occasion endanger his life and force him to escape back up to the hills. In the Eucharist which we share together, Jesus shares himself with each one of us. Through this, he satisfies in us a hunger which is far greater than the desire for food. For all of us there's a deeper hunger – a hunger for justice, truth and peace, for happiness and fulfilment in our lives.

St Paul recognises this and expresses it in his letter to the Ephesians in his beautiful prayer: "May he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith... until, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God" (*Eph. 3:16-19*). It is in Christ Jesus that we discover our own high purpose and destiny as a child of God.

But we receive this wonderful gift not for ourselves alone. We are called to share ourselves with one another – and not just through our food or our hospitality. That is just the beginning. When we share in the Eucharistic feast we are bound together as one body and one spirit. With the strength we gain from that unity we can go out into the world with great confidence. Through our sharing in what we have received from Christ, we can bring a positive change into the lives of others. Out of very little, great things can happen – as Jesus showed us in the feeding of the five thousand.

No matter how little time and resources we may think we have, to share these with others is a precious gift. We can "...bear with one another charitably" as St Paul goes on to say; we can bring justice, peace and truth, in a small way, to a troubled world. It is the love and sensitive compassion of those in union with Christ which brings Christ to life in our families and communities.

We can each think of people who are full of generous selfless love. And we can thank God for their witness in our midst but then we must ask ourselves how we can express the same generosity in our lives.