



The Church's prayer for Sunday 25th July

Lord God,
your Son left the riches of heaven
and became poor for our sake:
when we prosper save us from pride,
when we are needy save us from despair,
that we may trust in you alone;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Bible readings and reflection for Sunday 25th July

A reading from 2 Kings 4:42-end

A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, 'Give it to the people and let them eat.' ⁴³But his servant said, 'How can I set this before a hundred people?' So he repeated, 'Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, "They shall eat and have some left." ' ⁴⁴He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.

A reading from Ephesians 3:14-end

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰ Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

A gospel reading from John 6:1-21

⁶ After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ²A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to

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eat?⁶ He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷Philip answered him, 'Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.' ⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?' ¹⁰Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹²When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.' ¹³So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'

15 When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

16 When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, ¹⁷got into a boat, and started across the lake to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. ¹⁸The lake became rough because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the lake and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. ²⁰But he said to them, 'It is I; do not be afraid.' ²¹Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land towards which they were going.

A reflection from Revd Paul Garnell, Lordsbridge Team Curate

Today's readings present us with the story of two different miracles: the story of Elisha, who in the midst of a famine feeds a hundred men with 20 loaves of barley bread - and the story of Jesus, who when faced with a great crowd of hungry people; over 5000 men, women, and children according to the other gospel accounts of this story, feeds them with five loaves and two fish. Both stories share certain things in common.

Elisha's servant, on being told to feed the men with the offering brought by the man who came from Baal Shalishah, does not think it possible and complains to the prophet saying: How can I set this before a hundred men?"

And with Jesus too, as with Elisha, there is a servant, a disciple, who does not think it is possible to feed the people with what is available - the five loaves and two fish offered by the child that Peter's brother, Andrew, had found in the crowd.

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And in both stories - despite these small beginnings, the hungry are fed, and there are leftovers - indeed in the story involving Jesus there is an abundance of leftovers - there is more than when the feast first began.

The feeding of the great crowd, as John calls it, is the only miracle that Jesus did that is described in all four gospels. For this reason, if no other, we need to pay close attention to it. We need to ask ourselves – why is this so? What is it about this miracle - unlike all the other miracles performed by Jesus - that so catches the attention of the gospel writers?

I think it has to do with at least three separate things.

The first is the fact that this story tells us that Jesus is used of God - that like Elisha he has God's favour and is able to feed the hungry - much as the people of Israel were fed by God in the wilderness with manna. In fact, John goes on after the telling of this story to speak of Jesus as the bread of heaven come down to earth - the one who is not only able to satisfy the physical hunger of his people - but their spiritual hunger as well. Jesus has, and is able to use the power of God to feed the hungry.

The second thing is that the story shows us not only God's power at work in Jesus, but also God's care. God reaches out through Jesus to meet the needs of those who are following him - much as God reached out through Elisha to meet the needs of the men who had followed him into the wilderness.

Jesus cares for those who seek him out. He wants to meet their needs, and he wants to see their needs met.

The third thing is that the story shows us is that Jesus is able to take what's offered to him and to multiply it - so that where there first seemed not enough ends up being more than enough.

It's this third point that I will focus on...

It has been talked about a lot, this miracle of feeding the great crowd of people, and perhaps more than any other miracle, people have tried to figure out how Jesus did it. Most people more readily accept the healing stories, they understand that the mind has a strong effect on health, that faith can in fact bring about healing. But multiplying loaves and fish? This seems more incredible, more difficult, and so theories have arisen to explain how it was

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done. The most notable theory is that when the boy who had the loaves and fish shared them and so inspired others to bring out what they had 'concealed' to share as well.

I can't say how the loaves and the fish multiplied nor do I want to try. But I do want to stress to you the fact that they do - as does the offering made to Elisha by the man from Baal Shalishah. I think that we really need to meditate on that fact. We really need to consider how too little becomes more than enough when it is offered to God. Recall once again the context of the stories we heard this morning. Think of the story about Elisha.

A man comes to bring the prophet an offering during a famine in Gilgal - some bread made from the first ripe grain of the season. It was a faith offering, the type recommended by Moses in the Torah. And Elisha, after receiving the offering, says to his servant "give it to the people to eat". Give it to the hungry ones here with me, feed them, for they need it. And what does he get in return - what is said to him? He is told that it is not possible, that there will not be enough to go around. Let us not doubt that assertion. There was not enough to go round.

In the four gospel stories about the feeding of the great crowd we hear something similar. Jesus is teaching on a hillside - there are over 5000 people there, and when evening approaches the disciples become concerned, they fear that the crowd will go hungry, and their solution is to ask Jesus to send the crowd away. But Jesus says to them - you feed them, and he asks Philip - who was from the region in which the story takes place, "where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" Philip replies "eight months wages would not buy enough bread to for each one to have a single bite." Immediately afterwards Andrew, who has found a boy with 5 loaves and two fish among the crowd, pipes up about his discovery - and then adds - "But how far will they go among so many?"

How far indeed. There is a great need. And there are not enough resources to meet that need. It all sounds so familiar, doesn't it?

You hear words like this a lot, especially when there are social or political problems that require the distribution of resources:

We don't have enough time.

We don't have enough energy.

We're not smart enough.

We're not wise enough.

We haven't the training we require.

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We're not professionals.

There aren't enough of us to make a real difference, there aren't enough of us to get the job done.

But Jesus, like Elisha, didn't listen to this from his disciples, rather, like the prophet, he took that which was offered to him in faith, blessed it, and handed it back to his disciples so that they might distribute it. Just as Elisha commanded his servant to give the twenty loaves of bread that he had received to the people anyway, saying, "They will eat and have some left over", so Jesus, after giving thanks to God, divided the five loaves and the two fish, and begins to feed the crowd.

And there was enough to go around. And there were leftovers - so many that there was more than there was to start with.

What voice do we listen to in these stories? The voices of the disciples - the servants - who say, when told to feed the crowd - there is not enough - it is impossible. Or the voice of the one who tells us "Feed the people" and who takes what we have to offer and makes it enough?

Mark, Matthew, and Luke all begin their account of the feeding of the great crowd by saying when Jesus saw the crowd he had compassion for them, that he cared for them.

Jesus asks us to do the same - he asks us to care, to have compassion, and to go out into the world, and teach, and heal, and feed the people. Miracles all have beginnings, and almost always those beginnings are to be found within us. Amen.