

Feeding of the Five Thousand

St Swithin's, Magherafelt

2nd August 2020

Genesis 32: 22-32

Matthew 14: 13-21

Shortly after what we know was a great spiritual experience for him at his baptism (when by some revelation from the Father), Jesus felt a new confidence in his vocation – “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased”.

He retired into the desert to wrestle with the Father and with himself, just as Jacob had done at the ford of the Jabbok.

He knew that he was the Anointed One who was to inaugurate God's Kingdom – God's reign – but what was to be the content of that reign? What was it to be about? What would it look like?

To use a crude analogy, what was the Programme for Government to be?

A number of ways of establishing his authority occurred to Jesus in the desert. One of them was clearly what we would call 'political': to turn stones into bread.

The ancient world was terrified of famine. Any ancient society, no matter how apparently stable, was only two bad harvests away from collapse – just as we are finding that we are only one microbe away from undermining the basis of our democracy and of the basis for social living. So in Jesus' world, any leader who could guarantee the supply of bread would be assured of political success and prestige. That's what Juvenal meant when he talked about the Emperors' providing 'bread and circuses'.

But Jesus had rejected that temptation; to use a good thing (feeding people) for a bad purpose – the exercise of a coercive authority over them.

Now a year into his vocation and ministry and following another cataclysmic event in his life (the execution of his cousin and mentor John the Baptist) much had changed.

He had attracted great crowds and great opposition. He had convinced many people that he was indeed the Kingdom bearer and convinced many others that he was a radical disturber of Israel and a threat to its stability.

It was Israel's misfortune to be a small country caught between rising and falling Empires. The Babylonians, the Persians, then the Greeks; now the Romans. And each had tramped its armies through Israel.

The rulers of Israel had had to learn the art of political compromise. Who wouldn't have? And this holiness movement, begun by John the Baptist and radicalised further by Jesus was in danger of upsetting a carefully worked-out equilibrium.

Yet Jesus' hold over people was also very tenuous. There was nothing further from his mind than coercive power. *Even the coercion of overwhelming shows of love.*

Such wonderful works as he did – such as the one we read about this morning – he did because “*he had compassion on them*”.

He healed the sick and he fed the hungry not as strategies to win influence over people's minds – but to show them that all the promises of the Messianic Kingdom were present in him.

He had been sent to restore Israel and he never offered himself beyond the borders of Israel. He was not a spiritual empire builder.

There is nothing flashy about the feeding of the 5000 – people eat and go home fulfilled. That is all.

As a matter of fact, what happened at that lakeside is happening again this morning here beside another lake, Lough Neagh, as we his friends gather to hear him speak and on other occasions to receive the bread of life from his hands.

Jesus presides at every Eucharist because he has compassion on us.

We have come through our own wilderness in the past four months. Some of those experiences have been worse than others. The suffering, as always, was not evenly distributed.

In most cases we didn't withdraw from the world around us in order to (or at least not specifically) to be nearer to God. To get rid of the clutter.

But maybe in the middle of it all, perhaps when faith failed, we wrestled a blessing from God. Perhaps, especially if you've experienced isolation from your family – your children and grandchildren. If you've been left on your own.

“Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He sent them across the stream along with everything that he owned. *And he was alone.*”

It seems to be then that there are certain blessings or graces that God can give us only when we are at our wits' end, when we have used up all our resources. When we are empty and have nothing left to give.

In some matters we have to be spiritually exhausted before we experience resurrection, because that is what Christian spirituality is – the passage from death to life – in this world as well as in the next.

There are very few people who can come to a really profound understanding of God or of His Son until they've been ground between the millstones of experience for a time.

So, what has this rather desolating experience taught us? Amidst all of the public service announcements and even amidst the terrible silence of lockdown, what was the voice of God been whispering for you to hear?

Because he is not silent.

The fact that you are here this morning probably means that you've missed serving God in public worship- that there is a *reality about God* in places like this that perhaps we have taken too much for granted.

It is interesting that Jacob associates God with particular places: Bethel where he saw the angels ascending and descending, and now at the ford called Jabbok.

It is absolutely true that God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth. It is also true that God is everywhere – *but we are not*. We encounter his holiness in certain places. St Swithin's, Magherafelt and by certain means, Scripture, Sacrament, and being together as his people.

And as more people begin to make their way back to church, or who come for the first time, or after a long absence, I've no doubt that God is saying to us (principally to those of us who have a public ministry of teaching and preaching and presiding at the sacraments) – I'm pretty certain he's saying to us exactly what Jesus said to the Twelve in that reading from St Matthew: *"They need not go away; you give them something to eat."*

And what have we to share with one another and with the world?

One thing and one thing only: Jesus Christ, the bread of life. Because when we have shared him we have nothing left to give.

Worship is different now and it will continue to be that way for a while. That is a pity and it is our impoverishment – even those of us who can't sing miss it.

But it doesn't affect the core of what we are and what we have. The friends of Jesus listening to his voice, learning from his example, encouraging one another, deepening his kingdom (his rule over our lives) and spreading it out there.

Then coming back again next week to allow him to make us more able to go out again for another week: the children who he loves, into the world that he loves – to share him, because we have nothing else to give.