

## **SERMON FOR THE NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – YEAR B**

God of wisdom, grant, we pray, that the words we have heard today may be grafted in our hearts so that they may bear much fruit for your Kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This week's reading from John's gospel seems very appropriate for us as we have another Sunday in lockdown, with the doors of our churches once again shut and we are shut inside with our own thoughts and prayers.

The world at the moment seems a chaotic and scary place, and we can feel as though we need someone who will lead us and provide for our needs. And this is especially so if our human leaders seem to be not quite up to scratch!

For the next few weeks we are taking a break from Mark's Gospel and going back to John, who we spent a bit of time with in Lent and Easter. And we'll look over these five weeks at just one chapter, chapter 6. Here, at the beginning of the sixth chapter of John, we have something of a "mash-up" of two stories, the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking on water.

The feeding of the 5000 is the only miracle story found in all four gospels. Matthew and Mark also include the feeding of the 4000, so this miracle appears six times across the four gospels. Clearly, this event meant a lot to the early church.

In the other three gospels accounts of the miracle of the loaves and fish, we are told that the people are hungry, and Jesus had compassion for the crowds. In John's account, however, we are not told that the people were hungry or in need of food, but rather, that it was Jesus who decided that they should eat.

When Philip responds to Jesus' question, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" he sees only their own inadequate resources and the seeming impossibility of their situation. Philip says what is realistic, "We don't have enough money." Having the middle name Andrew, I am always happy that Andrew finds a boy who has five barley loaves and two fish. But even Andrew sees the lack. "But what are they among so many people?" It is also worth noting that John says the bread is 'barley loaves'. Bread was usually made of wheat. Barley loaves were cheaper and usually eaten by the poor. So the offering of bread was a meagre offering of poor quality bread. Likewise, the fish would most likely have been dried or preserved fish. So not only did they have poor quality bread, the fish wouldn't have been very appetising either.

After Jesus made the people sit down, "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." In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus gives the loaves to the disciples who distribute it. In John, Jesus distributes the food himself, which would have taken a very long time for one person.

Although the presentation of this miracle scene is remarkably similar to that found in the other three gospels, John deliberately calls what Jesus does a "sign." That is, the real importance of this miracle isn't simply to feed those who are hungry but to reveal something vital about Jesus and about God. In this case, Jesus is the One who can satisfy every human need.

The other aspect of this miracle is that in all four gospels, it reveals something about the disciples and about us. In the miracle of the loaves and the fishes, we most likely consider ourselves to be the crowd sitting on the grass, receiving food from Jesus. However, they were not believers. We will hear in a few weeks' time that when Jesus wasn't meeting their needs, they stopped following.

I think that we need to see ourselves as the disciples. The role of the disciples in this story is not to be just consumers, although we can presume that they ate, too, but rather as stewards of God's bounty. Although we may receive the ministrations of the church in various ways in our lives, we need, at some point, to see ourselves also as being ministers in Christ's name, seeing the church not only as a place to receive, but also as a place where our gifts and abilities can be used for God.

Certainly the crowds in our gospel reading for today have a consumerist approach to Jesus. What they want from Jesus is more of the things he has offered, which is why they want to make him their king, because in that time and place, kings were seen to have not only control of their subjects, but they were also seen to have responsibility to provide them peace and abundance, much like many people see our governments today.

The miracle of the loaves and fishes is followed immediately by Jesus walking on the water. In Matthew and Mark's accounts, Jesus orders the disciples to cross the lake, but in John the disciples go on their own initiative. Note also that there is no mention of Jesus' calming the storm in this account. But like the other accounts, we are told that the disciples are terrified, but not because of the sea or of an approaching death, but because of the approaching Jesus! As Jesus walks across the water, he identifies himself to his disciples with the divine name, " I AM."

Although the crowds want to make Jesus king, in these two miracles, John reveals to the disciples, and to us, that Jesus is much more than a king, he is divine. But for me an equally important aspect of this week's gospel reading is the need to see God's abundance in the midst of what seems to be our lack and inadequacy. John is presenting God's abundant grace in these verses, which is more than we need or even want. A little boy, who doesn't know any better, offers what he has. Five loaves made of barley and two fish wasn't much, but it was more than enough for everyone there.

So often today, we as the Church can see only lack. Lack of numbers, lack of resources, lack of just about everything. But what this week's gospel is suggesting is that even if we offer up the little bit we do have, God's goodness and grace is more than able to create more than is needed. And we are reminded too today that in the midst of the storms that are seemingly ever-present, Jesus walks across the water and says, "It is I; do not be afraid."