

9th Sunday After Pentecost, 6th August 1017, Sermon by Br Luke efo

In this morning passage from St Paul, letter to the Romans we heard this:

⁶ It is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, ⁷ and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants; but 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named after you.' ⁸ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants

I wanted to just pause and reflect on this for a moment. St Paul is saying that not everyone who thinks they are a true descendant of Abraham is. Some are not, and while the covenant was given to Abraham, it is not the children of flesh, but children of the promise who are counted as descendants. St Paul is noting that it is the promise, the spiritual covenant, which is the measure of who are called the children, of God, not the physical line.

Once can see that he clearly understood how people who were not Jews, could, did and do become the children of God. He takes what was generally considered exclusive and makes it inclusive. He broadens the covenant to people who were willing to accept the message of the Gospel and acknowledge Christ as Messiah.

In case you are wondering what is meant by our opening sentences in the Gospel passage:

¹³ "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself."

Jesus had just been told of the death of his cousin John the Baptist. We forget sometime that John and Jesus were relatives and that they were almost the same age. John's ministry must have had an impact on Jesus, and we know that some of John's disciples went to join Jesus. It must have been devastating news for Jesus, no wonder he wanted some time alone.

But as is often the case he didn't get it. The crowds followed and would not let up.

¹⁶ Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.'

¹⁷ They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' ¹⁸ And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰

As first glance this is a very simple passage. The crowd followed, they were hungry and need to be fed, so Jesus fed them and there was a surplus of food.

The disciples wanted Jesus to dismiss the crowd, to send them away. So that the crowd would look after their own needs for food. But Jesus says 'no, you look after them'. I can imagine the bemused look on Peter's face, and his unrecorded but probably said "how do we do that"?

And then we see the pattern that Jesus uses. He gave thanks, gave a blessing, broke the food into pieces and then had the food distributed. The practical; person in me wants to know how. Did he keep giving them the pieces, or did the disciples take the pieces and break them some more. Did the crowd file past them, or did the disciples move through the crowd? So many questions and no answers.

I'm reminded of the miracles of St Clare, where the sister kept cutting thick slices from the one loaf of bread. So perhaps the disciples each got pieces from Jesus, and then they kept breaking more as the people needed them.

Why is this important? It probably isn't, but I wonder about it because, I'd like to know how the disciples reacted to what they were seeing. If they knew the food in their hands was not running out, did they say anything to the people as they distributed the food? Did they understand the significance of the event, or were they just overwhelmed by people needing food? And what did Jesus do while this was happening? Again, so many practical questions and the scripture is silent on the details.

We of course recognise the similarities to the Eucharist. We see the miracle in a different light to the disciples. We are after all, post resurrection people. But at this point in the ministry that all lay in the future. This was about meeting the need and, I think also teaching the disciples, that they had a responsibility for compassion and care.

The disciples needed to learn to nurture and care for people. They would have to, and thus will also need to, feed, both physically and spiritually, the flock that had gathered around Jesus. They could not just send the people away to look after themselves. Remember that much later Jesus will tell Peter: "feed my sheep". So, I think this is clearly part of their training for these later events.

Or put another way, this is a practical lesson in love.