

Sunday Morning Resources

Sunday 28 July 2024 - The Ninth Sunday of Trinity

Lectionary Readings (depending on the kind of service you are leading, you may use one or more of the following readings – however, you **must** use the gospel reading, as this is what the homily is based on)

2 Kings 4.42-44; Psalm 145.10-19; Ephesians 3.14-21; John 6.1-21

Homily

Today's homily has been written by the Rev'd Iain Osborne, Deputy Diocesan Secretary and Director of Strategy, Ely Diocese

What does it mean to have enough? Today's readings are about scarcity and abundance.

When the Gospel-writers included the story of feeding five thousand people, starting from a handful of loaves and fishes, they perhaps wanted to make a point that Jesus is not limited by the rules of physical scarcity that apply in this world. Jesus made the world, rather than the world making Him, and He's in charge. And we are also being taught a lesson about God's love. In the feeding of the crowd, we are being taught that God can provide, and God does provide.

It's a parable that is taught over and over in the Bible. (When I say "taught", I mean shown in stories, rather than being set out as a theological claim, because that's mainly the kind of books the Bible contains.) We see the same lesson in today's reading from Kings, when Elisha is the channel of God's generosity. And I'm sure you can call to mind other stories about supernatural abundance of food: also with Elisha (and also in 2 Kings 4), we have the widow's jug of oil that poured out a massive surplus which she could sell to pay her debts; or the jar of flour and jug of oil that never ran out and saved a famine victim from death (that's Elijah, in 1 Kings 17); or the manna and quails in the desert (Exodus 16); or the massive quantity of wine that Jesus provided for the rather boozy wedding reception at Cana (John 2).

God can provide, and God does provide. Which is all very well, if you say it quickly and don't think too hard about it. But it was an audacious lesson to teach to people living in ancient, agricultural economies, in which starvation was a fear that was never entirely absent. People in the ancient world knew what hunger was like. For that matter, we could say the same about a shocking number of people in Britain today. Churches around our diocese and country run foodbanks, so perhaps you yourself have encountered some of these people. Millions of children begin the school day hungry, millions of adults miss meals because of poverty. In this situation, a bland statement that "God provides" is clearly inadequate, to say the least. It could even be seen as offensive, as appallingly complacent.

It would indeed be easy for God to rain down on us all the wealth and goods that we need in life, so we never had to lift a finger. But God's key concern is our spiritual maturity. God's great project is not mainly that we should be well-nourished during the years of our

life, but that we should use our lives to grow spiritually so that we become fit for God's eternal friendship. And so, God sets us in life-contexts that help us to develop patience and courage, compassion for others' needs and generosity.

Let me suggest two ways that this works out in practice, and which I think we need to bear in mind if we are to make sense of this concept of God's abundance.

First, *God is not an individualist*. God has created us in solidarity with each other, and that is how God sees us. So, God might choose to help you, by giving to me; so that I can then share what I have, and help you. That way, I am built up spiritually by being able to exercise generosity; you are inspired to gratitude, not to me, but to God; and we are bound together with bonds of practical love.

In terms of practical economics, there is only hunger in the UK because we do not share. Hunger is not a result of God's lack of provision. The world as a whole produces more than enough food for everyone: starvation arises from waste, from war, from inequality and greed.

Some people suggest that the actual miracle that happened around the Feeding of the Five Thousand was that people were inspired to bring out and share their food – food that they were otherwise hiding away for their own selfish, personal consumption. As a way of reading the Bible, explaining away the miracles doesn't appeal to me very much – if you can swallow the big, hairy claim that God was born as a man, and that Jesus was resurrected, then I don't see why you can't accept the miraculous multiplication of loaves and fishes. However, this way of thinking does remind us that God provides abundance partly by inspiring generosity and sharing.

Second, *God sends for our needs, not our wants*. This is a principle of particular importance for us who live in consumer capitalist societies. Economic growth relies on us discovering ever-greater needs, and we are bombarded from childhood to the grave with brainwashing advertisements that link basic well-being to buying stuff or services. It is really hard, in today's society, to get a clear sense of what we actually need, as opposed to what we actually want. But worth trying, because most people who get a clear view of their own need will also come to understand that they have a surplus, so this is a path towards a light heart, freed from anxiety.

This distinction between needs and wants is also important, incidentally, in relation to running an Anglican parish. Simply being a worshipping congregation is really simple and cheap: we just need a place to meet (which could be a home, subject to proper safeguarding, or a hall); perhaps a source of music (which, these days, might just be a phone); and for the sacraments, which are so central to Anglican life, we need a bowl of water, or a loaf of bread and some wine. And yet our church has so loaded itself up with overheads, buildings and rules that many parishes struggle to survive financially.

That said, my first principle may also be relevant to church life: that God gives us enough, but we do not always choose to share. The norm for Christian giving, in both Bible and tradition, is 10% of income, a tithe. Many Christians do tithe in their giving to church and charities, and churches whose members tithe tend not to struggle financially. But across Ely

diocese as a whole, typical giving is less than 2% of income, and this fact alone explains many churches' financial problems.

Let me end by returning to the biblical story we read earlier, and to encourage you to engage with it as one should read a story, that is, by using your imagination. So, imagine yourself into the story. Think about who you are, in the story of the Five Thousand:

- Are you one of the hungry crowd? What are you expecting from Jesus? Anything? Nothing?
- Are you like the little boy with the packed lunch, a person who knows they have a little, but not enough. Are you frightened that what you have will be taken from you? Or are you willing to share, however foolish that might seem?
- Are you like the disciples – a practical person, full of sensible explanations why what we truly desire is not going to happen?
- Or are you like Jesus: ready to trust the Father, and to act in faith?

Ways to Engage all Generations

When different generations are gathered together in worship there is an opportunity to build relationships and to encounter God in our conversations as we build relationships and learn from each other no matter what our ages, stage of life or faith and for all present to feel included. Adding some wondering questions to the service at an appropriate moment can help to do this.

Wondering Questions: Some wondering questions that may help to engage all generations to ponder and explore during the talk, service or during the week may include (three or so) of the following style of questions:

- I wonder who your favourite person is in this story? I wonder why that is?
- I wonder what the crowd expected.
- I wonder how the little boy with the bread and fish felt. Why did he offer to share his lunch?
- I wonder what we can learn about God in this story?

Suggested intercessions

- For those who are hungry, because of poverty or warfare.
- For those whose wealth makes them anxious or selfish.
- For our new Government, that they might organise a fairer society and inspire us to care for one another.
- For people who run foodbanks.
- For those who try to keep our churches and parishes afloat financially.
- For ourselves. Give us this day our daily bread. Give us a generous and un-anxious spirit.

Suggested hymns/songs

- Eat this bread, drink this cup
- Be thou my Guardian and my Guide
- Guide me, O my great Redeemer
- I am the Bread of Life
- The King of Love my Shepherd Is

Activities to accompany the service:

If you are looking for resources to accompany the service for engaging younger children, then there are lots of online resources. The following free to access/download resources may be useful starting points:

- <https://flamecreativekids.blogspot.com/>
- <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/MessyChurchBRF/>
- <https://www.faithinkids.org/>
- [reflectionary.org](https://www.reflectionary.org/) – lectionary-based resources
- [engageworship](https://www.engageworship.com/) – in particular 'Area 52' for lectionary-based material
- <https://www.bdeducation.org.uk/product-category/primary-age-5-11/>
(weekly@ lectionary resource)