

May I speak in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

The feeding of the five thousand is probably one of the best-known stories in the Bible. We all know the synopsis, don't we? An unexpected crowd turns up, the disciples don't know how to feed them, a young boy comes forward with five loaves and two small fish, Jesus does his thing and – hey presto – everybody's fed with plenty left over. It sounds like another straightforward miracle story – in as much as any of those stories can be considered straightforward - another act of Jesus which we are unable to explain by natural or scientific laws. But what can we learn from it, and how does it apply to our society today?

One of my guilty pleasures is watching tv detective dramas, and the sleepless nights which have ensued from living in the same house as a one year old baby - who has greater energy levels than the Duracell bunny - have provided plenty of opportunity for me to binge watch the likes of Castle, Marcella, A Touch of Frost and the like. In all good detective dramas, what seem like irrelevant little details during the course of the story always end up being the key to cracking the case. A good screen writer will add all sorts of these details, designed to lead the mind in several different directions over the course of the drama before the big reveal at the end. Nothing is included by accident, and somewhere in the middle of it all is the sign that, if you'd only been paying enough attention at the time, would have unlocked the mystery. And so it is with John's account of the feeding of

the five thousand – which is by far the most detailed and specific of the various accounts of this story.

At the start, we hear that a large crowd have gathered around Jesus because they've seen the signs he was doing in healing the sick. The popular narrative – the one we've adopted - is five thousand (As an aside, I'd love to know who counted them – they must've had one of those clicker things that the sidespeople use on a Sunday morning!). In actual fact they would've only counted the men, not the women and children – the patriarchy was alive and well in those days – so it's a pretty safe bet that there would've actually been far more people. A vast crowd to cater for – even more than for breakfast after the Easter Morning Dawn Mass here at All Saints!

So - Jesus turns to Philip and asks him where they will buy bread to feed all the people - and as is the case so often with Jesus, it's a test – he already knows what he's going to do, but he asks Philip anyway. Now I feel a bit sorry for Philip here – you can imagine him thinking, “why've I got to sort it out?! I've already had to head count five thousand people!”. And, perhaps understandably, Philip comes back with a negative response. “Even with six months pay, you wouldn't be able to buy enough bread for each of them to have just a little”. In other words – its impossible! Forget it. Not going to happen.

How often do we fall prey to that as a community, in society, in church? I know I do! “We can’t afford it”. “We haven’t got enough volunteers”. “We can’t manage it”. “We haven’t got the resources”. “It’s too much work”. “People won’t like it”...?

And yet, a glimmer of hope. Andrew’s found a young lad with five loaves and two fish, and brings this to Jesus’ attention. Now, I wouldn’t be surprised if the other disciples are stifling laughs by this point – saying to each other “you’ll never guess what solution he’s just come up with!” It’s becoming farcical. This was a meagre offering by anyone’s standards, considering the scale of the problem. What use could it have possibly been?

And once again, so many parallels for us. “I can’t offer much time”. “I can’t manage every week”. “I don’t have any skills to add”. “I’m not very good at welcoming/praying/reading”. “I’m not the best singer”. “I’m not very good at talking about my faith”. “There are much better people than me”.

We’re so good at diminishing ourselves, our skills, our gifts, aren’t we? The boy in this story had, in material terms, so little to offer – and yet – he was brave enough to step forward and offer what he had to Jesus in faith.

And It's this offering to Jesus, in faith, that's one of the key details here. In the story, Philip doesn't know what to do. Andrew doesn't either – he's found the boy, but that's as far as it goes. The boy offers his loaves and fishes but doesn't have a clue how it's all going to work out.

How often do we find ourselves in that situation - corporately, or as individuals - where we have no idea what to do? This aspect of the story reminds us that the starting point is always to bring it to the attention of Jesus. You won't know what he's going to do with it – but part of having faith is being safe in the knowledge that he will do *something* – something we hadn't thought of, something new or creative, or something we thought impossible – like feeding five thousand plus people with five loaves and two fish. But – like the boy in the story - we have to be brave enough to take that first step, and offer what we have – no matter how insignificant or unworthy or apparently useless it may seem to us. As Tesco would say - every little helps.

Another key detail in this story is the boy's willingness to *share* what little he has – not knowing what Jesus will do with it – and under a fair assumption that in doing so, he himself will go without. To help others, he gives up his own food. You might ask, why should he have done this? It would've been far easier and presumably tempting to say, "they should've brought their own lunch". "This is mine". "I haven't got enough to share". "These strangers are not my problem" – and then keep a low profile and go off and eat it on his own

somewhere quiet and out of sight. But he doesn't say any of these things. He shares what he has with others.

We hear the same phrases in society today constantly. You only need to listen in to conversations on the street, on the bus, in the pub – or glance at the front page of the Daily Mail or Daily Express - to encounter it. “They should provide for themselves”. “People don't really need to use the foodbank”. “Why should I pay my taxes to pay other people's benefits?”. “They wouldn't be homeless if they went out and got a job”. “They're not my problem”. “They should go back to their own country”. “They're own government should look after them”. “We don't have enough space or resources for them”. “Charity begins at home”.

Our society often seems increasingly selfish, self-interested and self-absorbed, with the ultimate goal being to create wealth. The gap between the rich and poor is ever widening. The Trussell Trust report that food bank use has reached its highest rate on record. According to homeless charity Shelter, the number of “homeless but working” families has risen by 73 per cent in the last ten years, with the poorest 30 per cent of UK households worse off by between 50 and 150 pounds last year. Meanwhile, the richest 10 per cent of households in Britain hold 45 per cent of the overall wealth and the richest 1000 families control a staggering total of 547 billion pounds, which has risen by more than 112 per cent since 2009, according to the Sunday Times Rich List.

Make no mistake, folks – this is a sickness, and this is wrong. How quick we are to forget that just like the most marginalised, poor, oppressed and needy in our own communities, Jesus was a man who knew suffering all too well, and was ultimately executed by a powerful and prosperous society – the same society from which we have drawn many of our values today. Go figure.

And yet, we have the solution right beneath our noses, spelt out in today's readings: God will provide for everybody – but we must have faith in that fact, and be willing to share. And this is where another detail in the story is key. The people ate as much as they wanted. Not more than they wanted. We don't hear that they gorged themselves and then took doggy bags home to stockpile. Equally they all had enough and were satisfied. But it's a safe bet to say they didn't all eat exactly the same amount. Different people would have had different needs. And so the food was shared not equally, but equitably. Note the difference! There's a meme going around on social media at the moment which illustrates this point brilliantly – three people of different heights watching a sports game over a fence. To have equality, they are given an identical box to stand on to see over the fence – which is fine for the taller two, but the shortest still can't see. In order to see over the fence, the shortest person needs two boxes, thus achieving equity – and they can all see. We are charged not just to be champions of equality, but equity – and this will often mean that we – broadly people living in relative privilege in global terms – may have to go the extra mile to ensure that the most deprived, needy, and vulnerable in our

communities and in the world have what they need to level the playing field.

Another thing which strikes me particularly in the story is that Jesus retreats up the mountain when He realises that the people want to make him King. He avoids and actively shuns power in human terms. Likewise, we must not be greedy, or chase power or prosperity, or prioritise our own interests over the common good. Just like the boy in the story, we need to view our fellow humans with compassion, empathy, and generosity. We are *all* each other's problem and we need to step up to that responsibility, just like the boy in today's gospel reading. As Jesus says, 'truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for the least of these, you did not do for me'. We need to see others how Jesus sees them, to see Jesus *in* them, and to let them *know* that we've seen them by showing care for them.

John's account of the feeding of the five thousand can easily be viewed as a Eucharistic narrative – it pre-empted the idea of a Eucharistic Christ long before Jesus institutes the idea of communion at the last supper. What's more, it places it firmly as a social provision – providing people with the daily bread which would sustain them. In doing so, Jesus shows us something of the Kingdom – how things could be if everybody had enough, if society was more equitable. He also shows us that the Eucharist cannot simply be a group of Holy people in an upper room nibbling bits of bread and

sipping wine. It has to be worked out and lived out in all we do. So as we approach the altar this morning, let us hold on to that fact, and take it with us as we are sent out into the world.

Jesus' giving of himself was not confined to the cross – it was central to His whole ministry – and so it must be for us. And when we achieve this, we may just glimpse heaven here on earth.

Amen.