

August 2nd 2020 Sermon for 8th Sunday after Trinity

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Bible Reading Romans 9. 1-5

Gospel Reading Matthew 14.13-21

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

So, I want to do things a bit differently today with our bible reading. The one set in the lectionary is Matthew 14:13-21. Which is the story of the feeding of the five thousand. This is an unusual story about Jesus because it is one of the few which is covered in all four of the gospels. So to start we are going to look at two versions of this story. One is from Matthew and the other is from John. So I encourage you to read them both, they are included below for you.

Matthew 14:13-21

Feeding the Five Thousand

¹³ Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' 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 And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

John 6:1-14

Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand

Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), ² and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick. ³ Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. ⁴ The Jewish Passover Festival was near.

⁵ When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" ⁶ He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

⁷ Philip answered him, "It would take more than half a year's wages^[a] to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"

⁸ Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, ⁹ "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?"

¹⁰ Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

¹² When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." ¹³ So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

¹⁴ After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world."

Now we should start by saying that there is much that is similar in these stories. We are not looking at huge differences or contradictions instead we have two different accounts which include different bits of extra information. And so there are differences and perhaps the most obvious difference is that one of these accounts is longer than the other. John's account includes quite a bit more information. We have a more specific location. We have a more specific time of year. We have more dialogue. And perhaps most key, I think, is that we have more people directly mentioned. In Matthew's account we only have Jesus named but in John's we have five different people mentioned. And amongst those 5 there is the most vital person – someone who Matthew doesn't even mention, someone whom we don't have their name just who they were – and yet someone who although easily missed, there would be a very different story without. And no the answer for once is not just Jesus!!

The biggest difference for me between these two accounts is that John includes – even as a passing comment in the dialogue a small boy. John tells us that there is a boy who has five small bread rolls and two small fish. Matthew doesn't mention the boy, Mark doesn't mention the boy, Luke doesn't mention the boy. He is not deemed necessary to those accounts. Each mentions the loaves and fish he had but none mention where they came from.

Now this to me highlights one of the joys of the bible. That we have different gospels, that we have different accounts. It gives us four different yet equally important lenses to see Jesus. Each writer being inspired to include different things, focus on different elements. It brings a diversity to how we understand Jesus which I think is beautiful. The early church thankfully did not seek to unify these stories into one gospel. Instead they saw an encounter with Jesus in each – even though they are different. It speaks to me of how each of our relationships with Jesus is unique to us and yet also there is something shared, something unifying in it too. Just like the gospels – unique and different and yet unified. And so we have the fact that John is the only gospel to mention the little boy! If it wasn't for this gospel his actions would never be known even though so much came out of it. And there is something in this for us to think about.

First, let us think a bit about what must have happened here. This boy, this small boy offered to Jesus all he had. He had so little just a small packed lunch that he must have left home with. There was a huge need here. There were five thousand hungry people, a situation which the disciples felt was hopeless, which most of us would have felt was hopeless, which logic tells us is hopeless. And what he offered was never going to solve it, and yet he was still prepared to offer everything he had.

How many of us respond like the disciples when we see some of the huge problems ahead of us, whether in our lives, whether in our communities, whether in our country, or whether even in the world. We see the problem and we think like the disciples. This is impossible! There is nothing we can do here! We convince ourselves that we have nothing to offer, that we are too insignificant, that we don't matter.

I don't think that this small boy was the only person to have food amongst these 5 thousand people, that makes little sense to me. I do however think he was the only person in that huge crowd with the courage, with the belief, with the humility, with the compassion and perhaps with the innocence to offer all he had to help the need he saw. He didn't think how small the contribution. He didn't think I'm too insignificant. He didn't think this won't make a difference. Instead he thought I will give all I can, what little I have. I will give it to Jesus – for my hope and trust is in him.

That boy is remarkable and is I think an example to us of what it is to be a Christian. It is not our job to think the problem is too big, the need too great, there is nothing we can do. Instead it is our job to bring what little we have to offer, to do what little we can – to place it in Jesus' hands and know that in God it can be accomplished. Because this story is not just about the little boy and what he had to offer, this story is also about how Jesus works through and works with what the world might consider insignificant.

Because the amazing thing is that it is through that boy that the wonder of everyone being fed is accomplished. None of the accounts tell us how, there is no information of how it was done. We just know that Jesus took this offering blessed it broke it and distributed it and in the end there was an abundance of leftovers. In short God took what looked like an insignificant act, a tiny offering and used it to fulfil a need abundantly!

Brothers and Sisters, we need to be inspired by this story. We need to think and behave like this little boy. Because this is how God works! This is not a story about some big elaborate gift by some rich businessmen. This is not a story about somebody giving out of their abundance to fulfil a need. Some billionaire offering a million pounds but making zero impact on their extravagant lifestyle.

No! This is a story of somebody, somebody deemed so insignificant that they are not even mentioned in three of the four gospels. Somebody whose offering is mocked by the disciples. Somebody who the world will never know their name! But somebody who God used to do amazing and wonderous things. Somebody who God used to do something that is known the world over even 2,000 years on. Somebody whose little offering of 5 rolls and 2 fish are written forever into the annals of history! Brothers and Sisters, if we ever need inspiration about how our actions, how our offerings can change this world then we only need read this story. Because God uses what might seem small and insignificant to do amazing things.

I can't help but read a story like this and think of another one. One where Jesus is at the temple and watching all the rich put their gifts into the temple treasury. And he then sees a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. A gift so insignificant that nobody would have noticed it, but Jesus did! And he says "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on". And just think of how many people have been inspired by these words of Jesus, just think over the 2,000 years how this woman's tiny offering has inspired so many of us to give to those in need. Jesus took what seemed a small, insignificant gift and from it there has come abundance.

Just like the boy we will never know this person's name. Just like the boy she will probably never know how much of an impact her offering, her act of compassion had.

But just like the boy – God worked through it and an abundance came.

So can I encourage us all, as Christians to approach the problems and challenges we face like the little boy. Not being discouraged, not feeling what we have to offer, what we can do is insignificant but giving and doing what we can and trusting that through these small acts God can do amazing things.

But there is also something else for us to learn from this story. Because it is only in one Gospel that this boy is mentioned. Were I just to look at the account in Matthew today the boy would not have come up even though it is through his gift that the feeding is started. And so we need to be aware that much of the small things we do might go unnoticed. They might not be recognised by those around us. They might not be given the credit they deserve.

And so there are two things we should take from this -

The first is that what might not be noticed by others, or seems insignificant to others, is noticed and deemed incredibly significant to God! Jesus used that boy's gift on purpose, Jesus noticed and saw the significance of it and it was through that he chose to work.

The widow's gift would have been unnoticed, but Jesus saw it and saw the huge significance it had and chose to inspire us through it. We might never know the impact of our small acts of generosity, compassion and love but we can take immense comfort from the fact that God does! And God works through them. It is through those actions, it is through the small things that people like me and you can do that God chooses to bring about the kingdom of God. And in God our small acts, our small offerings are multiplied abundantly so that what looks impossible becomes reality!

So do not be disheartened because what goes unseen is seen by God!

But the other side is that it doesn't have to be that way. We don't have to allow these small acts to go unnoticed. In fact I think we need to become communities where the opposite happens. I think the way the boy can go unnoticed in three gospels highlights something we need to change in our outlook. We can become consumed by the end result of things. We can focus too much on the grand narrative that we never give thanks for the small actions which allowed it to take place.

I think the Church needs to become a place where not only do we follow the little boys example in our actions but also a place where we become better at noticing, supporting and giving thanks for people like the little boy in this story! The glory is God's but that doesn't mean we can't be grateful for the little boy here too!

If God works through actions like that then we need to be better at giving God thanks for people like that. During lockdown how many of us have been the recipients of small acts of love and compassion? How many of us have given thanks for them? Have taken the time to see God's work in them? Some things that have been done for us we perhaps haven't even taken the time to recognise. We can be like those in that crowd who are fed but never think and give thanks for the gift of love that allowed it to happen!

We cannot rely on amazing people like that little boy to make huge sacrifices alone, instead we need to be communities where we encourage and support each other to all have hearts like the little boy. To pray that we too might have that compassion in us, to pray that we too might have the bravery to allow God to use what we have to offer no matter how little we think that is.

If as the Church we are to follow Jesus example then we need to be places where the unnoticed are celebrated. Where small acts of love and compassion are given thanks for.

Because the more we do the more we will be changed also, the more these acts of love become instinct, the more in tune we become with the spirit of God working through us!

The story of the feeding of the five thousand is one we should be encouraged by incredibly. In it we know that God can take even the smallest gift, the smallest action, the smallest offering and through it make what looked impossible become reality!

But I also think we need to be challenged and inspired by this story too. Because if God can do all that with just that boy bringing what he could. Then imagine what the world can look like if the church fully takes on, fully commits to being that small boy in the world.

What we have might seem small and insignificant but when we take it to Jesus amazing things can be achieved.

And the joy of it all is that it starts and is done by you and me acting in love and allowing Jesus to use our gifts, whatever they are, to bring his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven!

Amen