

Proper 12 Year B 2021

Today we have two stories of miraculous feedings. We are all familiar with the second one - I remember preaching it last year from Matthew's Gospel; just me and Mel in St Andrew's during lockdown - and no, you won't find it in your files if you keep my sermons (and I know some people do!) because I did it off the top of my head, so to speak. I never wrote a word down.

So today, let's look at the first story, from the second book of Kings.

A man comes from Baal-Shalisha. We don't know his name, but we know where he comes from. It is indicative of the apostasy of the people of Israel that a town could be called after a foreign god. The Elijah and Elisha cycles of history frequently focus on the struggle between followers of YHWH and followers of Baal, a 'god' introduced to the Northern Kingdom by Jezebel, wife of King Ahab, and then followed by their descendants.

The man comes 'bringing food from the first fruits'. This is a time of war. There are constant skirmishes between Israel and Syria. Harvests are difficult to gather; indeed the growing of foodstuffs is hazardous. But he comes, 'bringing food from the first fruits'. What does that tell us?

Firstly, trust. He clearly trusts that there will be more. He doesn't wait until his barns are full or until he has sold his harvest and has money in the bank. He brings an offering from his first fruits; he brings what he has, trusting that there will be more, that he will be able to feed his family, support them in the times ahead. This act of giving embodies his faith in God's provision and his genuine thanksgiving for it.

Faith, trust, thanksgiving - the root of a life lived in the presence of God. We could call this act of giving *stewardship*. It is what we do with what we have.

And from this act of stewardship springs a life of hospitality. From the initial gift comes the impetus to feed the gathered multitude - 'how can I set this before a hundred people?' asks the servant. Barley loaves, the food of the poor, would have been small, like pitta breads, not large loaves needing sliced like I made yesterday - and they were wheat, the food of the rich! Hospitality is a recurring theme in the OT. Remember Abram, feeding three travellers outside his tent in the desert - hospitality which would result in the promise of a child to Sarai - or the hospitality recorded earlier in this chapter of 2 Kings (read it when you get home) where a woman makes a room with a

bed available for Elisha whenever he passes by, resulting in another miraculous birth. Hospitality, the act of caring for one another, either out of our abundance or out of our pittance, is the life force which creates community.

From acts of stewardship and the practice of hospitality flows the abundance of God. This little story - just three verses from an ancient text - teaches us so much. It is a promise; the promise of God's abundance. This abundance comes because of our stewardship and our hospitality. The company has food enough and some left over because the man comes with his gift and Elisha gives it away. God uses what we offer - but we have to offer it first. We have to trust in God's abundant love and, in thanksgiving for that abundant love, offer what we have for his use.

This story comes from the Old Testament - but it is clearly Eucharist - Thanksgiving. God gives us ourselves so that we can share ourselves and everything we have with others. This is the nearest St John gets to a 'Last Supper'.

Just like the young boy who had five barley loaves and two fishes - 'but what are they amongst so many? What would have happened if the boy had said 'It's mine? You can't have it'. We

will never know. He gave, trusting that his gift would make a difference, trusting that something good would come of it.

In the world as we see it, especially as we see it through the lens of modern media and politics, it is very easy to look at the needs of the world, shrug our shoulders, and say 'the problem is so big, there is nothing meaningful that we can do'. To quote Phillip 'six months wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little'. Hand washing! But Andrew looks at things in a slightly different way, sort of 'what are they amongst so many people?' It is a question, a question requiring an answer. And the answer is right there - Jesus. Jesus - love, care, faithfulness. Enough to feed a multitude and with much left over.

It is so easy to say that what we have is so little in the face of so much need (or indeed, like our Government to say that in spite of the need we cannot afford it), and so turn our backs. We know that whatever we have is not enough, but not enough is not the final answer. We need to place our 'not enough' into the hands of Jesus, to bless, to break, to give. Our 'not enough' might seem like one small raindrop into the ocean of time, but in the hands of Jesus little can be much, the few can be many, the weak can be strong, and we can arrive at the place to which we planned to go

in the first place. But do we have the courage, the faith, to
trust?