

Sunday - 02.08.20

Sermon by Rev'd Steve McMahon

Many years ago, a group of us spent a day on the streets of the city of Leeds in the United Kingdom. We had fifty pence – about a dollar in Australian money. No mobile phone. No credit cards. Just 50 pence and a cross. Here's mine. We spent 12 hours with no agenda, nowhere particular to go, just wandering the city looking for God. I have to be honest, watching the shoppers dashing by without regard to the people who spent every day on the streets, knowing that you hadn't even got the money to buy a cup of tea or coffee, knowing that even the public toilets would cost almost half of the total amount of cash in your pocket, was a sobering experience. I didn't find God in Leeds – I found God's absence.

At the end of the day, I was hungry. But it wasn't real hunger. It wasn't the sort of hunger that caused stomach cramps. I didn't feel faint from lack of nutrition. I also knew that at the end of that day I would be fed – there was going to be a hot meal waiting for me. Many of the people I saw that day didn't even have that.

In today's Gospel, Jesus has withdrawn to a quiet place. He's just heard that his cousin John the Baptist had been beheaded and was looking for some down time but the crowd followed him. Despite his own cares and needs he didn't get irritated with them but, we are told, had compassion on them. Compassion itself is a word which is often misunderstood. Compassion literally means "suffering with someone": com – passion / with – passion. Jesus felt compassion for the crowds who had gathered together in the wilderness to hear him so he healed the sick and fed five thousand of them with bread and fish.

Jesus did this because he saw them suffering and, through compassion, suffered with them. He felt the pain that they felt; he shared their hunger. He also shared with them the pain of our human condition. The very act of living – of being human – means that our health and lives are precarious. Even Job lamented that "human beings are born to trouble".

If you've seen the film Jason and the Argonauts, you may remember that the Gods sat comfortably on Mount Olympus moving Jason, Hercules and the rest, around a chessboard, playing games with them. Until the time of Jesus many people had that impression of God, lounging around and laughing at human misery. Now, however, one who was said to be the Son of God was here – born in a stable and was tramping the dusty ways of Galilee with them. The implications of this are world-shattering: here we have a God who understands weariness, hunger and thirst. This is truly a God of compassion – a God who suffers with us. Even now, it is an unfamiliar message that we really need to share with others.

Turning to the miracle of the loaves and fishes, we see that this is a miracle of God's abundant love and generosity which actually sprang from a small boy's willingness to share what little he had with others. Even though the people couldn't see the point in this apparently futile gesture, Jesus gives them everything they need and an abundance (in the same way he did when the

wine ran out at Cana) so that there were a dozen basketsful of leftovers. They didn't just have enough but had more than enough. The miracles are not only wondrous physical experiences, but are also signs – in this case of God's abundant generosity and compassion.

But it isn't only the miracle that is worthy of our attention but also that of the people who witnessed it. The crowd reacted with gratitude – but gratitude of the wrong sort. Their immediate reaction was to try and make him their king – and this was from a motive of greed. A king, they thought, would seize control and drive out the Roman army. Then they would have even more to eat as they wouldn't have to sustain the Romans as well. The miracle satisfied their hunger for a short while - but they immediately wanted more.

That's often the case – when we see something good, we want more. We try to control it. In essence, they wanted to control Jesus for their own desires – to ensure a constant food source. Their response to God's generosity and abundance was avarice and greed when it should have been wonder and thanksgiving.

In the modern, developed world, we hear a lot of people grumbling that they find times hard – and yes, some people do find themselves in difficult situations. However, look back not that many years and see how people lived fifty or a hundred years ago and you see that we all normally enjoy a standard of living that many would not have had then. We still moan and complain though instead of being grateful to God for the generous feeding miracle all around us. Indeed, to see true hunger today, we need to look further afield – by looking on your expensive television at the pictures that are beamed from Africa, or South America – where people live in slums (or worse) and literally have nothing to eat.

When you see images like that, what is it you feel? Do you share their hunger? Their pain? Do you really feel the hunger gnawing at your vitals because that is what compassion really means. Yes, you might put money in a charity tin or donate food to our local food bank – that's praiseworthy and will not go unrewarded. But it isn't real compassion; not the compassion Jesus, the Son of God, felt for the people in the wilderness.

Jesus' aim in working miracles was to show that God is present with us, generously supplying all our needs, both spiritual and physical. He wanted us to be grateful to God – not to demand more. He gave the five thousand sufficient food and they still wanted more. However, as he later pointed out, this is bread that doesn't last – instead we should be hungering for the bread that leads to eternal life. That's why, in the Eucharist, we are offered a small amount of bread to point us to the generosity of God – God who gives us his body to be broken and his blood to be shed for our sake.

If we understand what is happening, we won't clamour for a bigger share of what the world has to offer us but instead we will realise a sense of awe and gratitude at how generous God actually is to us already, along with a renewed determination to share what we do have with those who have nothing.