

## St George's Anglican Church Malvern

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost Yr B 26 July 2015

2 Kings 4.42-44 Psalm 145.10-18 Ephesians 3.14-21 John 6.1-21

I hope the members of the Mothers' Union won't have to look out over the crowd that will gather for lunch today and ask, "Where are we going to get enough so that they can all have something to eat?" I don't believe we need worry about that today...

For the next five Sundays, Christians of all kinds across the English speaking world who follow the same scriptures readings as we do, will be hearing this one chapter six in John's gospel. The whole chapter centres around an event called the feeding of the five thousand or the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. Six times in all four gospels, a similar story occurs. That has to mean it had extraordinary meaning for the early generations of Christians. And it is meaning we can recover if we take the trouble to read this chapter at home during each week, ready to receive its abundance in our generation.

So today, we begin our thinking about the significance of the story with the story itself. Jesus has returned to the Galilee from Jerusalem where he healed a disabled man at the Bethesda pools (some of us were there in May) and got the Judeans off side because he did on the Sabbath, when 'work' is forbidden. So, home he goes, back to where he came from. He's going to be popular there for a while, but it won't last of course.

Jesus is in a deserted place, it is nearly the festival of Passover but the crowd of men track him down (presumably because they don't have to be at home getting the Passover meal ready, or they just didn't count the women and children) and he asks the disciples, "Where are we going to buy enough bread to feed this lot?" Any Jewish person hearing these this story, set at this time of year, the spring festival of Passover, is going to think back - ah, yes, wilderness, no food - Moses and manna from heaven.

However it happened (and *how* is not a helpful question) Jesus is able to feed five thousand with five barley loaves and two dried fish - and have the disciples collect twelve baskets of leftovers! Not only are the people fed, there is an abundance of food in a place where it seemed there was only scarcity before. When they speak with Jesus about it, both Philip and Andrew stress that it would be impossible to buy enough to feed the crowd; six moth's wages

would not do it. What's more, what is to hand from the small boy's bag won't be any use either; five loaves and two fish is so little among so many.

Human resources are completely inadequate. Well, when did that ever stop Jesus having a go! He tells the crowd to sit down, and John says there was a lot of grass there. Remember the twenty third psalm about God the shepherd; 'he makes me lie down in green pastures'. Jesus, who will later call himself the Good Shepherd is about to nourish the flock gathered around him now.

Jesus then blesses God for what is available, takes the food around to everyone who receives abundantly, no rationing, they have 'as much as they wanted.'

The crowd is so taken with Jesus that they immediately want to make him king; they want to take him over and have Jesus be and do what they want; the little purpose they imagine he has because they do not yet see the much greater. Jesus was having none of that and withdrew.

Many of the clergy spent two days this past week listening to an English bishop urge us to become once more a church that knows the abundance of God's life and love we have been given to share. We can't share what we don't have, he said. Bishop Stephen Cottrell of Chelmsford challenged clergy to so teach, that is feed the people in our parishes, that they have more than enough to share with others.

Scary isn't it? Not very Anglican, 'sharing' the gospel, is it? We Anglicans have lived for a long time being able to assume the world around us worked with us. Now, that is no longer true and many people don't know, or know much, about what we do, what we believe or what we have to offer - and some of those are people in church!

Well, take heart. This story of physical need met is a 'sign' of a deeper, spiritual need being met by God in ways that we can still receive today.

Take heart. Jesus uses the meagre resources he is offered and they are not only enough, they are far more than enough in his hands. The reaction of the crowd in wanting to label Jesus with their own familiar categories reminds us that we so readily settle for the little we can imagine, not the much more God wants to make known to us.

The bread was a great gift; but for those willing to go further into this story, wants and expectations will be exceeded.

They can become the people with an abundance to share with those who have no idea who God is and what God offers in Jesus.

God's abundance is to be seen among us and can be seen, even in today's world. We need to understand that we are to become what we receive in holy communion; we are to become what we receive when we eat the bread and drink the cup, the symbols that nourish us with the very life of Jesus.

St Augustine, the fourth century bishop of Hippo in northern Africa (yes, Augustine of the passionate Confessions) said this:

When you eat this food and drink this wine, they will be transformed into your substance. Equally, you will be transformed into the body of Christ, if you live in obedience and faithfulness...Therefore, begin to receive what you already begin to be.

So, for the next five weeks the bread will be given into your hands with these words:

*Become what you receive.*

The response is: *The Body of Christ,*