

3 August 2014

When I was in the seminary many years ago, a special guest was invited to a formal dinner and to give a major speech. The guest was asked to say grace which he did according to a pretty standard formula 'bless this gathering, bless this food and bless those who provided it'. It was the conclusion of the prayer that struck me with such force and which I remember very clearly almost 20 years after the event: 'Give bread to the hungry; and to those who have bread, give them a hunger for justice'. That is, give bread to the hungry so that they will never be hungry again, feed them, yes; but to those who will eat well, to those who will have a full stomach, give them a hunger for justice, make them 'hungry' in order to overcome the poverty which afflicts so many.

I mention this because in today's Gospel we have a very well-known story and image of Jesus feeding the five thousand. From so little, he feeds so many. This story speaks to us of God's abundance, that from his great love, God desires in Jesus that no-one should go hungry, that they should be fed in order to satisfy their hungry hearts. While the focus is on what Jesus does and provides, the other focus is a lesson in discipleship. To be a disciple of Jesus is to provide, to feed those that are in need. This is what disciples do; this is what it means for us to be a Eucharistic people. We welcome those who gather; we pray and celebrate; we take, bless, break and give which is an ancient Jewish custom now linked to the Passover of Jesus. The parish community acts in the name of Jesus, the Eucharist is given as food and drink for the journey of life, the Eucharist is celebrated to deepen and strengthen our faith.

At the conclusion of this great miracle story of the Gospel, the disciples would have been in no doubt whatsoever that they were being called to imitate Jesus, to imitate the Master. Remember, the disciples said to Jesus, 'Send the people away and let them go and buy food for themselves'. But what did Jesus say in reply? 'Give them something to eat yourselves', that is, take responsibility for gathering the people, for feeding the people, for nourishing their minds and hearts. Discipleship – following the example of Jesus, doing as he did, doing it joyfully, humbly and with much faith.

The parish is a living community of faith. Our doors are open to welcome people, to gather people in faith, to celebrate, to grow in our love of God and each other, to pray for each other and our world, to look out for each other. Above all we gather to deepen that call which comes to us in Baptism, the call of service, prayer and witness.

Today's Gospel picks up an ancient theme that we see in today's first reading from the prophet Isaiah; 'Come to the water all you who are thirsty. Come, eat and drink. Come and satisfy your hungry hearts. Come and find true riches at the table of the Lord'. We all know that in the world at the moment, there is a great hunger, a great yearning for peace. Peace between troubled parts of Russia and Ukraine, peace between Palestinians and Israelis, peace in Syria, peace in Iraq where Christians are being expelled from their country in huge numbers, peace where people cannot worship God in freedom as we do today when we walk through the doors of this parish church.

Where world events challenge our sense of hope, St Paul speaks to us beautifully in today's second reading; 'nothing can come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus ... neither death nor life, no angel, no prince, no created thing'. In a world of fragile peace, we hold firmly to this hope, the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord. And so, as we gather to celebrate the Eucharist, conscious of the freedom and peace we enjoy in this country, we pray for those in our world searching for peace and longing for freedom.