



Revd Ro's Reflection on Ninth Sunday after Trinity

Proper 13

Year A

Matthew 14.13-21

Romans 9.1-5

August 6th is also The Transfiguration of our Lord but for continuity these reflections will follow Proper 13.

The fourth Sunday in Lent used to be known as 'Loaves and fishes Sunday' because this was the gospel reading set for that Sunday in the Book of Common Prayer. Our Gospel reading, the feeding of the multitude, is one of the most familiar in the gospels. There is another feeding of the multitude story, the feeding of the four thousand in Matthew 15 and we must be clear that these are two separate incidents not one in the same. Jesus says to his disciples in Matthew 16:

⁸ 'You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread? ⁹Do you still not perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹⁰ Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹¹ How could you fail to perceive that I was not speaking about bread? Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!' The gospel reading begins, 'Now when Jesus heard this.' What Jesus had just heard about was the execution of his cousin John the Baptist, in prison.

'His (John's) disciples came and took the body and buried it; then they went and told Jesus.'
(Matthew 14.12)

So no wonder Jesus gets into the boat to be by himself, Jesus must have been shocked and grieving. We remember his reaction at the death of his friend Lazarus; we are told 'Jesus wept.' When we receive tragic news we need to have space to be alone with God. Quite apart from this devastating news Jesus was tired out from his work; tired out from the demands of the people. We have seen over the previous weeks Jesus teaching in parables, what has been omitted from our readings was Jesus reception in Nazareth (Matthew 13.54)

‘He came to his home town and began to teach the people in their synagogue...⁵⁷ And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, ‘Prophets are not without honour except in their own country and in their own house.’⁵⁸ And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.’

Our gospel begins after this event and the explanation of John’s execution. Jesus needs time to himself, a time to pray, a time to be quiet. We all need that – to keep on and on only leads to dis-ease-to burn out. But the pressures of modern life are seemingly so inescapable it is almost as if we are programmed to keep going. Actually that is not the case. In lockdown this vicious cycle was broken of necessity. I remember so well the address to the nation of our dear late Queen Elizabeth II. The Queen advised people to ‘Take this time for rest, for meditation and for prayer,’ wise words indeed. The time of lock down did allow time to rest, to take stock of life, to live at a different pace not like a hamster on a wheel. It is often the curse of modern life that there is constant pressure. But people have always put pressure on others.

Jesus knows he should get away, he knows he needs to recharge, to be still with God. So he gets into a boat and leaves the shore to sail to a quiet place, a place of retreat. He doesn’t get it – the people, some of whom have travelled for days, follow and when he gets out of the boat, multitudes of people are there already. What does Jesus do? Get into the boat and sail on? No – we are told he ‘Has compassion on them.’ He heals their sick – at great cost to himself, once more wearing himself out. Yet, and this is the point, to how many people does he give back life that day. They set out in hope and faith – Jesus can heal me, and they are healed, their lives will never be the same.

This he does all day and at evening the disciples say send them away, get rid of this lot they have nothing to eat. Jesus simply says, ‘You feed them.’ The cry comes, ‘we can’t feed them.’ This miracle story is of vital importance to the gospel writers; it is in the three synoptic gospels, but also in the gospel of John. It is very unusual for something to be in all four. This is a large crowd, some ‘5000 men,’ not counting women and children. Jesus tells the people to sit down. He is totally in control and sure of himself; there is even the detail that there was a lot of grass there, it has such a ring of truth.

Some people find the miracle stories challenging. I don’t and I never have. That doesn’t mean we are unthinking, but miracles are an integral part of Jesus’ work. The God who created heaven and earth who came down to live with humans is quite capable of anything. This story will be followed by Jesus walking on the lake. The disciples have already said, after the stilling of the storm, ‘Who is he then that even the winds and waves obey him?’ Luke 8.25. Quite –Jesus controls matter.

It isn’t that miracles just happened once upon a time. Miracles are still happening. God is still active. Of course he does not intervene all the time, if he did we would be little more than marionettes and this earth a huge stage.

Now Matthew takes us to the miracle story itself. Jesus takes the food, the fives loaves and two fish and looking to heaven he blesses it. All his signs are done in the power of God. A filmmaker would, at this point, pan down to his hands. As he breaks the bread we are taken straight to the supper at Emmaus; that was how the disciples recognised him. Straight to the Last Supper, where Jesus blesses and breaks the bread and he says the words, ‘Take and eat, this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’

When all the people are fed we are told the leftovers filled twelve baskets. Twelve of course is the number of the tribes of Israel, God’s chosen people. By his teaching Jesus is offering spiritual food, ‘One does not live by bread only, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.’

(Matthew 4.4). That is the central point of course. Jesus, God incarnate, is bringing the word of God to the people of Israel, those whom God has loved throughout their history, those who have the covenants and promise of the Messiah. People had the chance to have their lives changed that day and not just by healing. And yet, look back a chapter, to the rejection in his own home town, and on to his rejection by the crowds in Jerusalem and finally his condemnation and crucifixion, it is tragic.

The link between the gospel and the Romans reading is that 'humans don't live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Father.' That is the Good News of Jesus' message, he brings the 'bread of heaven,' but the Jews, God's chosen people, those who wait with longing for the promised Messiah do not recognise Jesus as that anointed one. The scribes and the Pharisees, the ones Jesus berates so often, are the religious leaders, the very ones who should recognise him as the Christ, the fulfilment of the promise of God. Instead they are just the opposite; they are the 'blind guides' who lead the people into the ditch. Now we need to be very clear about what Paul is saying in this reading from Romans. It follows on well from the gospel.

To begin with Paul says 9.2. 'I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.' We would probably say, 'I am in the depths of despair.' Paul is anything but that, for to despair literally means to turn your back on God. That is the last thing Paul would do. His next words are simply an illustration of his sorrow and the depth of his feeling. ³ 'For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people.' I suppose we would say 'I would give everything if only.' Paul feels so deeply about this that he says he would sacrifice everything, even his love of God in Jesus, if only his people had accepted Christ, had seen Jesus as the awaited Messiah.

What Paul writes here is the absolute opposite of some anti-Semitic rant. Jesus is a Jew, in direct line from the greatest of all the Jewish kings, David. Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one promised throughout the scriptures, he is king of the Jews. Jesus makes it clear that he was sent initially to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' Paul is a Jew and by education a Pharisee, they are his own people as he says,

³ '...my kindred according to the flesh. ⁴They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; ⁵ to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever.'

He expresses so clearly the way the Jewish scriptures point to the Messiah, to Jesus the Christ. Paul's great sorrow is that so many of the Jews did not recognise Jesus as their long awaited Messiah, they did not accept their birthright, the one who would, as Paul has explained last time, come once more to rule the earth and complete God's new creation.

Jesus is the promised Messiah, the anointed one who came to fulfil God's promise to his people the Jews. But God's promise is for all people. All who believe in him he makes children of God and heirs with Christ.

¹⁶ 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.' (John 3)

From the first followers who did turn to Jesus, who heard him and believed, from the first Jewish Christians, who were the yeast, the mustard seed, the word of God and the Christian faith has spread throughout the world. We are the heirs of God and his children; his promise is for us and all

humanity. May we live out the Christian faith we profess for Jesus asks no less. 'Whatever you do to these, the members of my family, you did it also to me.'

A blessing

Follow, where the Spirit of hope leads you.

Listen, as the Prince of peace cries for you.

Rejoice, as the hope of God embraces you.

May hope, love and peace live in your hearts.

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