



Sermon preached by Revd David Tatem on Sunday 2 August 2020

Matthew 14:13-21; Isaiah 55:1-5; Romans 9:1-5

In the early 1980s we moved from a traditional manse at the end of my first pastorate into the accommodation that went with my next post as the Chaplain to a polytechnic. This was a staff flat in the halls of residence and as you may imagine there were a lot of differences and I could take up a lot of time listing them all. There was one difference, however, that inspired me to include it as an illustration in a sermon that I preached a little while after moving and after the significance of it had begun to sink in.

The difference was that whereas in the manse the rubbish was collected weekly, in the halls of residence the bin that stood just outside our door was emptied every day and I gradually came to realise that I found this a very refreshing experience! Instead of the detritus of several days building up and immediately outside our door in a rather confined corridor, every morning the bin was empty ready for that day's rubbish.

I don't recall the text for the sermon but I do remember that I preached something along the lines of how God's grace and forgiveness liberated us from the past and set us free for the future so that every day was fresh start. We probably sang 'new every morning is the love' although I couldn't say for certain, I didn't have any record of that or indeed a copy of the sermon, just my recollection.

In recent years it has in a sense come back to haunt me because if I was to use that as an illustration in a sermon these days, as in a way I am, I would be preaching a rather different sermon! The main reason for that is because of the way in which the bin was emptied. The large plastic bin bag that was in the bin was simply removed, no matter how much was in it and replaced with a fresh new one and all the bags from around the campus were dumped in a skip and taken to the tip.

What would we say now about such a practice and what kind of theological reflections might we offer?

I'm not going to go too far down that route except to say that it would include something about social responsibility, care for the environment and probably something about the ease with which we allow personal convenience to desensitise us to deeper issues and concerns and distort our priorities and there is enough there surely to be getting on with. We did after all already know enough about the problems created by too much non-recyclable rubbish being dumped for me to have been perfectly able to understand the deeper aspects of what happened every day but I was simply so overcome by the freeing experience of a fresh start every day to really stop and think about it.

Which gives us a different and more contemporary and one might say relevant take on that story of the feeding of the five thousand. There have been endless theological debates about the possibility or otherwise of miracles and interpretations of the story that have attempted to bypass any possible supernatural element by suggesting that the loaves and the fish were simply symbolic of the packed lunches that everyone had actually brought with them. Other interpretations have explored the significance of the number of 5 thousand men (not to mention women and children and to get too het up about the inherent sexism of that is just for the moment to get ahead of ourselves but we'll come back to it) and then there is the number of 12 baskets being representative of the 12 tribes of Israel and what that might signify. I would not wish to suggest that the exploration of that is a waste of time but often that kind of preoccupation can divert us from exploring other aspects.

The question to begin with, for us, is what does the story offer to us now? And for an answer to that it is surely important to begin from the perspective of human need and of God's response to our need and what that tells us of God as well perhaps, of what it tells us about ourselves.

Matthew's account begins with the reference to the crowds that have followed Jesus into the wilderness, whole families, not just individuals but representative of community and for once the Pharisees don't put in an appearance, there is no-one trying to trip him up or trick him with clever words. Matthew tells us that he has pity on them and heals their sick. There is no description of miracles performed just a simple statement of Jesus' compassionate response to human need on a large scale.

Then comes the disciples' failure to grasp the point of what is happening. It's getting late and maybe they are getting hungry and they just want to get rid of them. There's no follow through in thinking about their suggestion of sending them to the villages to buy food; no realisation that some of them may have money and others none, that some might find a nice pavement cafe and have a good dinner while others are looking on enviously with empty stomachs.

Jesus' response is firm. No! There is no need for them to go away. You give them something to eat!! We have a responsibility here. Their response to that has an almost whining tone about it. Us?! But we are so under-resourced there is nothing we can do we've just got these pathetic loaves and fish...

I quite like John's telling of this story because there it's a little boy who offers the loaves and the fish and again you can almost see the shrugging of shoulders going on when the disciples ask for help but the only offer of help comes from one of those you would least expect to be able to offer anything, which fits beautifully with Jesus habit of turning things on their head.

And then comes the miracle; not the kind we may be familiar with from the Harry Potter films where Dumbledore waves a wand and the tables are filled with food. Jesus blesses the food and then the disciples take the blessed five loaves and two fish and distribute them. The miracle doesn't happen in Jesus' hands but in the hands of the disciples probably without them even realising it. Jesus' message is not that He can do remarkable things but that *together* we can.

There is surely a kind of hidden message here about what I think of as God's Economy, which seems an appropriate phrase to use as many are now increasingly thinking and talking about how the world should emerge from the present complex crisis of pandemic, climate change, racial justice and so many other things and create an economy for the world that is substantially different, more equal, in all sorts of ways, more equitable and empathetic towards one another and towards the creation.

My email inbox seems to be increasingly filled with messages from a variety of groups, some long-standing and some new, which are focussing on exploring and trying to build such a new way of being together. There are videos, online webinars and zoom meetings, conferences and congresses. Some are academic, some are arts based in one form or another, perhaps linked to an area of therapy, some have roots in some form of spirituality and within that some come from the churches. The Joint Public Issues Team of which the URC is part, for example.

What they all seem to have in common is the linking together of a comprehensive set of areas of our common existence with empathy and compassion being vital components.

It should not be hard for us to believe that somewhere in the mix of all of that might just be the Holy Spirit and if that is the case then we are back in the territory of partnership with God which gives us once again both the opportunity and the challenge to be engaged, to put God's Economy into practice in word and in action and we might do no worse than to draw on that story of the feeding of the five thousand as an inspiration not just for ourselves but for others too, to be determined and positive about the future. There is another component of the story that is both encouragement and challenge, something that illustrates the character of God's economy which is the generosity that we see expressed there. Think back to the story once again. There is not only enough provided but almost an extravagance and for once that is not a wasteful extravagance but a message about how God has built in to creation a principle of generosity that we can share in when we cooperate rather than when we try to take control.

Once again we are in the territory of word and action, opportunity and challenge and strangely perhaps we might pray for a different kind of pandemic, one that can infect the world with the generosity of spirit that we find in the heart of God.

Amen