

Sunday 2nd August 2020
8th Sunday after Trinity (A)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 55.1-5

NT: Romans 9.1-5

G: Matthew 14.13-21

‘We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish’

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Very few things would make my heart sink as a child more than the announcement of fish for any given meal. I grew up amid a doughy climate of non-observed Church of Englandism, and yet still, Medieval Catholic Europe haunted the nursery with the expectation that, once a week and normally on a Friday, we would eat the catch of the sea rather than the lively fruits of Kentish pasture. In retrospect I might give thanks that the spectral influence of Sir Thomas More now only extends to our menus and eating habits rather than our legal procedures etcetera but at the time I thought it particularly disappointing. I have now grown to love fish- the prospect of Sole dripping in capers and butter or grilled whole turbot, its charred golden skin giving way to sticky flesh within or sweet white flakes of cod in the golden batter they do so well Yanni’s round the corner- all fill me with glee, but the yellowy mush of Smoked haddock poached in milk in the nursery or the amorphous lumps of pink flesh and phlegmatic sauce that passed as salmon at school did leave their mark for many years. Fish was disappointing, fish was not to be enjoyed, fish wasn’t what I ordered.

Consequently, the memory that first jolted me when reading our Gospel this morning was of disappointment. ‘We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish’- well, that would have elicited a period of sustained grumpiness from a younger me, rancid little toad that I was and to some extent remain. Indeed, the disciples seem set to pull a not dissimilar act- suggesting to our Lord that the people- on whom we a critically told, ‘he had compassion’-

should be sent away to source food of their own in the surrounding villages. The idea that these people might only be fed with five loaves and two fish is not only disappointing, but frankly ridiculous; perhaps, after all, they think, this man is not the Messiah we ordered.

And yet, as ever, as is at the absolute core of his nature, Christ transforms. He not only transforms the loaves and the fish- so disappointing to start with- into sustenance for all but in doing so he transforms the expectations of the disciples- indeed transforms their whole mission as they change from being those who seek to deny the people their food to the very ones who are called to distribute it (a vocational lesson if ever there was one). He transforms the crowd too from being weak and hungry to being full and, in so doing, transforms the entire dynamic of the scene. Fish and loaves might have been a disappointment, a source of contention even at the start, but by Christ they are transformed into things that show his power and his care and his love, for transformation of that which seems disappointing into those things is what it is his business to do.

What joy- greater even than that spurred by turbot or cod- must we have and feel in our souls at the prospect of our feeble gifts, our fragile bodies, our meagre offerings of loaves and fish, being multiplied- being sanctified- by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. That is the essence of this action by Christ. The self-appointed forces of reason- though is there any mode of appointment less likely to produce reasonableness than that one?- they would have us deny the miracles of Christ as mere conjuring tricks, as delusions misunderstood, with the great multiplication of food for the five thousand being the most oft quoted example of such hoodwinkery. How wrong, as ever, they are. This is about the absolute transformation- of loaves, of fishes, but most centrally, of humanity by the Grace that Christ affords and offers to each of us. To rubbish it as a show of magic is to fail to realise that the transformation we are called to is of our nature as much as it is of loaves and fishes.

For the heart of faith knows that, as much as this is a demonstration of the lordship of Christ over and through the woven fabric of material created order, it is, most importantly, a foreshadowing of creation made wholly anew, a creation which includes us. It is a sign- at which we should wonder- of what Christ can do for us, of what he can do to us, and, most crucially perhaps, what he can do with us. If he can feed five thousand with these disappointing, unpromising morsels of the fish I so dreaded as a child- how much more can he achieve with our hands and hearts and voices to feed and heal and nourish a world which cries out to know the gospel love?

Think of your gifts. Think of what it is you bring up and offer to Christ in broken baskets and vessels. Think what your five loaves and two fish might be. Think, believe, nay, know that can it be multiplied and transformed by the one who knows and love you with a knowledge and love that surpasses all other. That is what the Church is for- yes to feed those who need sustenance, but also to multiply gifts and grace. This ought to be a place where the feeding of the five thousand happens each and every day- what is that we can do together to make it so? In the gospel Jesus says 'bring them here to me'- so bring what talents you have, that which might be multiplied. Come to him today, in a matter of moments, as he feeds us in the Holy Communion with bread and body- but not with fearful hearts, not with a sense that you are disappointing, you are not to be enjoyed, or that you are not what he ordered. Come knowing, instead, that by giving him your heart and soul, you are a cause of delight- that though you may offer but loaves and fish in church today, by his grace it can it will, you can, you will, be transformed to a nourishing vessel of glory.

Fr Fergus Butler-Gallie