

Year A, Proper 18 2nd August 2026

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

A bit of boiler plate here. The Feeding of the Five Thousand is the only miracle story to be found in all four Gospels. The miracle becomes one of the Signs in the Gospel of St John. It is a miracle and a sign of Jesus powerful presence.

It transfers over to ordinary language and becomes a thing. It comes to mind when the ten guests for your Easter Lunch become fifteen at the last minute when you no longer have enough time to go to the shops. We'll need to feed the five thousand today, you say.

Caireen and I have a very attractive seventeenth century print which we got at an online auction in Florence and which our colleague at the American church picked up for us and stuck in his suitcase and brought down the road when he had a meeting in Rome. In the print, Jesus looks busy – presiding over a basket of bread and fish while a crowd gathers around him.

In my print, it is Jesus with a determined look on his face presiding over the basket. He's the one at the worktop. Julia Childs, Heston Blumenthal, Mary Berry, Jamie Oliver, Stanley Tucci. He prepares good things and does marvelous things. He did marvelous things for them, he can do marvelous things for you. In our Gospel reading it is Jesus who takes the loaves and the fishes and looks up to heaven and so the question – what is this all about - is answered in the way that every Sunday School student knows that any question posed by the teacher is to be answered.

Jesus. It's about Jesus.

That's a short answer to the question and this could be a wonderfully short sermon and, technically, Nick and I are both on holiday and are not expected, in Rome and Penicuik, to exert a herculean effort on sermon preparation but I am inclined, nonetheless, when everybody is looking to the right, to look to the left

and to return to the opening discourse to see if there's something that might be missed.

In Matthew, Jesus has just been informed of the death of John the Baptist and has retreated in light of this news to a solitary place, to gather his thoughts, to chart his course, to embark into the empty space that the death of the Baptist has opened. The crowds follow him. They're waiting for him on his arrival. He has compassion on them and heals their sick.

The crowds remain and the disciples, recognizing the painful logistics of feeling responsible for such a large crowd at some distance from their homes suggest that Jesus tell them all to go home or at least to the next village so that they can make their own dinners.

Verses 15 to 18

When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a lonely place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They said to him, "We have only five loaves here and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me."

In this story which we generally understand to be a story about Jesus making something from nothing it is certainly not from nothing.

Present in the discourse is the expectation on Jesus' part that the disciples are to care for the crowds. Present in the discourse as well is that they have something and not nothing. It isn't much but it is something and the feast which ensues is not pulled from the air but is on a continuum with the resources present in the community.

As it always is and as it always has been.

Moses has some knowledge of the Egyptian court. Amos is a shepherd. Ezekiel is a visual story teller who may well have a priestly formation. The widow of Zarephath who encounters Elijah in a time of famine has a handful of flour and just a little oil. The woman cured of the hemorrhage in the midst of the crowd has

just enough faith to drive her to touch the garment of Jesus in the midst of a crush of people. The Roman centurion has a complete but largely irrelevant knowledge of how orders are given and received in the military world and speaks to Jesus of what he knows. Zaccheus has done nothing but climb a tree to get a better look.

No, it ain't much. It doesn't feel like much. It falls below the threshold of being taken seriously. Compared to what ensues from these stories it might dwindle in comparison, but it isn't nothing. It is an offering. It is an ember in the midst of the kindling, it is the smallest crack in the solid wall, it is (at very least) the evidence of your involvement in the process.

Which brings me to you and to me. Even on one's holiday you don't leave a congregation in the ether of a story which has to do with somebody else, in some other place, facing a series of exigencies which are not ours.

You know the task ahead of you and you feel that you have paltry resources with which to deal with it. You have all correctly understood the families you live amongst, your children and grandchildren, your parents and siblings and there will be a dozen or so of you here this morning who feel told that you are to scratch what itches them, fill in what they are lacking, give them what they are missing and you, like the disciples may point to a miserable collection of your natural attributes and estimate that it is not enough.

Or, the object of care may be yourself and not some other. Knowing or being told that you need to be different, better, more complete than you are doesn't make it happen. Be a better camper, you're told. Be more faithful, more deliberate in getting on with your lives, be gentler, kinder. Solve your instability. Deal with that addiction, cure yourself of that abiding anger, with all those things that have strained your links with God and neighbour. You're in your fifties or sixties or seventies now – time that you grew up. And the resources that you have seem a paltry collection indeed, your self-estimate has suffered through a few failed attempts or the opinions of the people you live and work with. How would you even begin. In this world, which has become a darker and more uncertain world, we live with words of Jesus that we are "light of the world". How would we begin, and what part does the household of faith deal with the unbelievable brutality

which we had taken as a thing of the past. Christ himself and the early church took it as an axiom that the world was ours to heal. How would we begin. Moving from the global to the local how do we feed and heal the local community in which we live? How do we begin in this world seemingly without heroes?

You begin by offering what you have because (and here's something we sort of already know and must admit) some of us will not even do that because the hopelessness has gotten the better of us and the easy answer is just too accessible

...send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves

Spoken by realists. Spoken by people who have grown accustomed to meagre returns

To which the answer is no. No. It's not necessary that the people should leave. There is no elsewhere where rivers of milk and honey flow. There is no magic location, far from you, that you can travel to fix what ails you. No neighbouring town where those who had originally come to you can relieve you of the crushing sense of responsibility by solving their problems there.

Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat

It is not necessary that the people should leave. You give them something to eat. You. That very man, that very woman. Make your paltry offering. Commit your slender resources. Speak. Organize. Consecrate who you are and what you have. Jesus ends his command with these words making reference to the five loaves and two fishes:

"He said, "Bring them here to me."

Every Sunday your parish priest takes into his hands a small disk of unleavened bread and a cup filled with ordinary wine and a dash of water. He thanks God for the gifts of the earth and the offering of human hands and he raises them, acting out the words of Jesus at the Last Supper. Following the Eucharistic Narrative and the words of Jesus at the Last Supper he crosses his hands over the offering and in the Epiclesis asks that the Holy Spirit would overshadow these small gifts and make of them something other.

Jesus makes the substantial something out of very little and yes – he is presented as a thaumaturge, a worker of miracles and a giver of the Signs of his presence but he is engaged with ordinary people and requires of them their engagement. The Kingdom of Heaven is like one who... Who? Angels or divine beings? No, like a woman sweeping out her house for the lost coin, like the person sorting through ordinary pearls, or catching a netful of fish, or standing desperately at a judges door nagging him for a better judgement. And the small faith of the woman in the crowd touching Jesus' garment is adequate as a first step, and the Roman soldier using his standing orders as an analogy for how God might answer prayer, and Zacchaeus up his tree.

These prove adequate, like a fragment of unleavened bread and a splash of wine, like the words of a Christian man or woman to a friend in distress. Like the project a parish church might undertake to provide food or resources to their community. Like a few words penned by a thoughtful person about an untenable injustice.

Perfectly ordinary, completely inadequate and just the very thing that Christ requires.