



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Eighth Sunday after Trinity

Proper 12 Year B

Ephesians 3. 14-21

John 6. 1-21

Last week our reading was from Mark 6 which missed two accounts from the middle of the gospel passage. It dealt with Jesus' healing ministry around the Sea of Galilee. The accounts within it were of the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus' walking on the water. I touched on these within my Reflection.

This week our gospel reading is from John 6 and it deals with these two accounts. These stories appear in all four gospels which is by no means always the case. Often accounts appear in the synoptic gospels but not in John or vice versa. As so often with John our reading begins, 6 'After this' anyone reading a passage which begins in this way would always wonder, 'After what?' John is very specific.

5.1 'There was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem...' Jesus is standing by the pool which was believed to have healing powers when the water stirred.² 'by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes.³ In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralysed.' When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, 'Do you want to be made well?'⁷ The sick man answered him, 'Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.'⁸ Jesus said to him, 'Stand up, take your mat and walk.'⁹ At once the man was made well and he took up his mat and began to walk.'

So, like in the passage from Mark, Jesus is healing the sick. However this healing is on the Sabbath. Initially the Jews accost the man who has been healed for carrying his mat on the Sabbath when it is not lawful to do any 'work.' When the man tells the Jews it was Jesus who cured him the result is predictable,

¹⁶'Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath.'
Jesus stands up to them but what he says is this,

¹⁷ 'My Father is still working, and I also am working.' ¹⁸For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God.'

There is no question Jesus is being quite clear about who he is; he is doing his Father's work which of course the Jews are furious about. How dare he say God is his Father, and by implication he is God's Son. John is pointing out Jesus' divinity in this passage. Jesus goes further with these words, ¹⁹ 'Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise.'

I have looked back at this passage and quoted at length because it not only puts our reading for today into context, it shows that Jesus is speaking boldly and clearly to the Jews in the inner sanctum, the Temple in Jerusalem. He is calling God his Father and is referring to himself as the Son. That would enrage the Jewish authorities and they would be seeking to kill him or arrest him at the very least. With the following words Jesus is stating that he is the long awaited Jewish Messiah who will judge not only the people of Israel but the whole earth.

²⁶For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; ²⁷and he has given him authority to execute judgement, because he is the Son of Man. ²⁸ Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹ and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.'

Jesus knows he is on very dangerous ground in speaking so plainly but his task is to tell the people the truth of God; to give them the good news and to reveal himself as the Messiah. However, as he says elsewhere, 'My time has not yet come.' It is not the time to face the wrath of the Jews, that will happen in the future as God ordains. So Jesus leaves Jerusalem and goes over the Sea of Galilee with his disciples.

What should strike us about the account of the feeding of the five thousand in St. John's gospel is the detail that it includes. To begin with we know where Jesus is, he has gone up the mountain with his band of followers to be quiet, but just as in Mark's account the crowds, hearing of Jesus' marvellous works and healings have followed him. John includes these key words in his account, ⁴ 'Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near.'

No detail in St. John's gospel is accidental and is often highly significant, even symbolic. It is so with the fact that it is Passover time. Passover of course is when God freed the people from slavery in Egypt and Moses led them away at the Exodus. John has already told us of Jesus' driving out the money changers from the temple at Passover. The last time will be when he is in Jerusalem and will share his last meal with his disciples and will be killed as the Passover lambs are, to set his people free. We should remember all this when we read this passage. The characters in the story are very clearly delineated too. Firstly we have Jesus talking to Philip.

⁵'When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?'

We remember it was Philip who recognised Jesus as 'the one about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' as he said when he went to tell Nathanael and to bring him to Jesus. It was Philip who when Nathanael said, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' answered with words that are at the heart of Christian mission, 'Come and see.' It is Philip who we see in the Acts of Apostles baptising the Ethiopian eunuch and spreading the good news of Jesus.

Here it is Jesus who remarks on the crowd and asks where food is to be found. But we are told Jesus knows exactly what he is going to do and this is just to test them. The task is an impossible one – there simply wouldn't be enough money to provide food for them. Philip is pretty specific in his answer.

The next detail I think is fascinating, it's obvious this is an impossible task yet Andrew brings the lad to Jesus. ⁸'One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, ⁹ 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?' It is, on the surface, a pretty ridiculous thing to do – and yet.

Andrew has been following Jesus from the very beginning. He has seen with his own eyes Jesus' marvellous works. Is it too much to imagine that he, with the eyes of faith, is hoping that Jesus can use this morsel of food to feed the crowd? Maybe so, Andrew does not present the lad for nothing. Just as in Mark there are five loaves and two fish and a good deal of grass in the place. We have the same number, about five thousand'. Jesus is specific in his orders,

¹⁰ 'Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.'

Jesus takes the bread in his hands,

¹¹'Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated;'

This takes us straight to the Last Supper, to the meal at Emmaus and indeed to our Holy Communion service.

Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks and breaks it. With this he feeds the multitude. At Emmaus the disciples recognised him as he broke the bread. At the Last Supper Jesus taught his disciples the meaning of his impending death. There he instituted the Eucharist and with the bread at communion he feeds us.

We should think too, as Jesus feeds the multitude in the wilderness, how God sent manna to the Israelites in their wilderness wanderings, Exodus 16. It is a direct parallel. We remember how Moses led the people from slavery to freedom in the Promised Land in God's power and in his name. Jesus leads people from the old slavery to freedom in God's new way. He wins salvation for us. All the promises of God have come to fruition in Jesus.

¹²'When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.' ¹³So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.'

The prophet, told of in the Jewish scriptures, the great leader who is coming into the world to rule his people, the Messiah, who is to set them free and to bring in God's new creation. However once the people make this connection they go further,

¹⁵ 'When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.'

This must not be, not yet. They want a king in their own image – a king who will destroy the occupying force by violence if necessary. They just do not know enough of Jesus' teaching to even begin to understand what his real Kingship is all about, what the kingdom of God is all about. They have not heard enough of the word of God to begin to understand God's new way. So he prevents it by going to be by himself and no doubt to pray to his Father.

Jesus feeds the crowds physically with the loaves and fishes but his words are 'the bread of life.' His teachings feed them spiritually. We remember that the resurrection took place at Passover tide. Jesus rose from the dead and won eternal life and union with God for all who believe in him.

The second episode in this account is again full of detail,

¹⁶ 'When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, ¹⁷got into a boat, and started across the lake to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.'

It is dark, they are going to this city to the north of the Lake, and they are alone. The sudden squall hits and a high wind is tossing the boat about. We even know that they have rowed three or four miles! John is that specific. There must be no doubt in the minds of those who read this that he is reporting a true account.

The disciple's reaction to Jesus' appearance walking on the Lake is that 'they are terrified.' How often have we heard that before, and we know what Jesus' response will be, 'do not be afraid.' Trust in Jesus banishes fear.

Miraculously they reach the shore to which they are going. Here in John Jesus does not calm the sea, he does not even get into the boat, they simply arrive at their destination at once. This is Jesus' God and man who controls the forces of nature. His words, 'do not be afraid,' echo down the centuries to us as they have done to all who truly turn to him. He is with us now, in all our fears saying those words – 'Do not be afraid.'

Our reading from Ephesians last week dealt with the fact that Jews and Gentiles were no longer two divided worlds but one united in Jesus Christ. All who believe in Jesus, who live in his way, are members of one family, the family of God in Jesus Christ.

²¹'In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.'

This is the last sentence from last week's reading. We are all the church and the church is the body of Christ here on earth. He is the head and cornerstone. There must be no divisions, no worries about race, gender, status or anything else. All are equal. It is a vital lesson for us to learn now. We are the family of Christ, and there must be no status or power seeking there. Equality in the love of God is the key note, a love which we should reflect in our dealings with one another.

This must have been music to the ears of those new Christians in Ephesus and the surrounding area. No longer did they have to feel like second class citizens. Christianity is not like a train with different compartments marked first or second class. Belief in Jesus Christ sets people free in so many ways and this equality, this knowledge of the love of God for all humanity, this secure belief that everyone is valued equally, must have been wonderful. As with the Ethiopian eunuch, who would have been barred from joining the Jewish faith, they are freed. We remember his words to Phillip, 'What is there to stop me from being baptised?' and they echo through this passage. The answer to all humanity is - nothing at all. Believe in Jesus, turn to him, live in his way and you are co-heirs with Christ of the promises of God.

Over the ages maybe the churches have forgotten this in people's desire for power and status. There is no room for this. Love not fear is the key message of Christ. As we saw in the gospel reading Jesus' words to all humanity are, 'Do not be afraid.' Love banishes fear and the love of Jesus Christ mirrored in our love for one another should be at the heart of every church community.

Paul begins chapter three of his letter with these words,

3.¹ This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—'

We remember that Paul is writing this letter from prison, we remember that he is the 'Apostle to the Gentiles' it is for their sake and of course for the sake of his Lord, Jesus that he is suffering as he does. He reiterates again the message that we studied last week.

⁵'In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: ⁶ that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.'

The world has been changed forever by Jesus, he is the Messiah, he is the second person of the trinity and in him God's purposes are fulfilled. In Christ all are equal. At Calvary and in his resurrection, he won salvation for all who believe. He conquered death and sin and bound all together in love.

⁷ 'Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given to me by the working of his power. ⁸Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things.'

Paul once again touches on two great themes, 'the gift of God's grace,' and his mighty power, the power and love of God are the key notes of this morning's reading.

That is why he begins the passage with these words,

¹⁴ 'For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.'

As soon as I read that line it resonated with this one in what must be one of my favourite passages in the bible.

'at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.'

Paul then says, 'I pray,' and that is the key to this passage. It is a prayer for these new Christians; he has assured them of their equality in Christ. He now prays for them and it is the most beautiful prayer. He tells them what being a Christian really means and of the blessings and spiritual gifts they will receive.

¹⁶'I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit,'

We think of the Holy Spirit as it descended on the followers of Jesus in the upper room and how they were empowered to go out and proclaim Jesus boldly to the crowd. Not only that, the power of the Spirit enabled them to do wonderful works. This is true in the sending out of the twelve by Jesus. Throughout the ages that same Holy Spirit has strengthened Christians and enabled them to do things which in their own power they never could. Jesus sent his Holy Spirit upon his followers at Pentecost; it is the same Holy Spirit which dwells in us now.

¹⁷'and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.'

This is what Paul means, Jesus Christ is within you, Jesus Christ is within all who truly turn to him. God's new creation is for the whole world. Salvation is universal in that it is for all believers. The power of God is so much above and beyond our understanding. So is the love of God for humanity. But we feel the love of God and we live in it. 'God is love', is a pretty good epithet. It is our job to be mirrors of that love in our dealings with others. Not just within the church but with all humanity. God's love is for all creation, of course it is, he made it.

You know when you see something so beautiful, paraphrasing is just impossible, well the climax of Paul's prayer is like that.

¹⁸'I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.'

Paul has felt that deep spiritual love of God. He has known these spiritual blessings. He knows the power of the Spirit and he prays that these new Christians will have that knowledge in Christ too. No wonder this is often used as a blessing at the end of church services. It is so comprehensive, such a beautiful prayer for us and all people.

I love Paul's conclusion to his prayer which of course concludes with the word Amen.

²⁰ 'Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.'

The power of Christ is within us, we do things by his power and we can do so much more that we could ever have imagined. Stop and think for a minute about that. Stop and think of your own life and then apply what Paul has said to it. Think of the things that without Jesus you would never have thought of let alone accomplished. Writing it down is often even more effective and I guess you will be amazed when you look at it.

Paul's prayer for the church is beautiful too. It is a prayer for all generations. Here is Paul at the very foundation looking down through history and praying for the church of Jesus Christ. He is praying his blessing on us knowing that God in Jesus Christ is with us always.

'To God be the glory great things he has done.' Francis Jane van Alstyne.

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