The feeding of 5000

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Pentecost + 9A — Mt 14 13-21

He was totally wrung out. But you see it in all caring professions. Like a nurse who’s been most of the night looking after someone who’s dying – and not just looking after the patient – caring for their family and visitors too. They’ve all been suffering terribly. This patient and their loved ones have become your friends over the past days. You can’t care for people so intensely and not get close to them. So at the end, this becomes *your* time of loss too. You’ve held it together; you *had* to. But finally, at the end, it’s time for you to leave them there together and crawl off to a quiet place on your own. But just then, the call bell rings; room 14 this time, and you think, ‘I’ve got nothing more to give; what can I possibly offer!?’

Today we meet Jesus at a time just like this. Recently, his ministry has been an uphill struggle in his home town. And just now he’s received the shocking news of his cousin, John the Baptist, beheaded at a public banquet by King Herod. John; was probably the only other person who’d really understood Jesus’ mission. Now he’s gone, and Jesus wants to be alone. So we just read –

13 *…when Jesus heard that Herod had beheaded John, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. … The crowds heard it [and] followed him on foot from the towns.* *14* *[So] when he went ashore, he saw a great crowd;*

A great crowd! Just what he needs! Should he push off again and sail away to a place where they *can’t* find him. He doesn’t; he won’t turn his back on these poor, hopeful souls. … *He had compassion for them and cured their sick …* so many of

them – people who'd walked so far; waited so long. … His work resumes.

Finally, [15] *when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and it's late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves."* If *he* wouldn't do the self-care thing, they'd have to take matters into their *own* hands. But this is a compassion story; Jesus, having shown compassion, expects the same of his disciples. [16] *… "They need not go away;* ***you*** *give them something to eat."*

So *many* people!? Like I would, the disciples focus on the problem. Looking out over that sea of people, thinking of the now exhausted supplies they'd brought with them, [17] *They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."* They focus on the problem; we have *no*thing … well, *some*thing. But it won't be enough.

How many of us back out of a challenge with that excuse? 'What can *I* do; leave it to the experts. *They* really ought to do something about it! It should never've been allowed to get to this point.' … We take our passion about something and hand it over to someone else so *they* can act; not *us*. 'What I have won't be enough.' Jesus challenges us. Nothing but five loaves and two fish? [18] *Bring them here to me.*

Every Saturday night for over 30 years, a parish or a school in this diocese has provided food for a three-course meal to be served at St Mary Mag's church. And most Saturday nights, this feeds about 150 needy people. Imagine if one day those parishioners and school families said, 'My casserole's only enough for four people; that won't be any use.' If that's what they decided, then last night, those 150 people would have wrapped themselves in their old blankets under shop awnings or trees in the parklands and tried to sleep with no food inside to help keep them warm.

Bringing what little we have to Jesus changes everything. Every Saturday, people all over this diocese in our parishes and schools bring their little bit to Jesus, and every Saturday night, he comes out of under a tree or awning and sits down at St Mary Mag's to eat a beautiful, hot three-course meal that any restaurant would be proud to serve. It's a regular miracle that's been happening now for decades.

People bringing what little we have, he blesses it and makes it enough. And he blesses us – he won't transform our gift without transforming us too. ***You*** *give them something to eat*; he continues to challenge us today.

We live in a world with millions of desperately needy people. When we pray that Jesus might help them, or maybe send them to someone who can meet their needs, and he replies, '*You* give them something to eat,' that's us he's talking to.

Sr Joan Chittister writes *'Prayer is not meant to be a magic act that cajoles and coaxes God to act. Prayer is meant to change us so that we will then change the world.'* We've been bold to pray so far; and we've been transformed. Can that encourage us to step out yet further, and pray; 'Jesus, please keep taking our offering and bless it and bless us'?

This makes me think about the way we affirm two things here each week; that *we are the body of Christ*, and that *his Spirit is with us*. The logical upshot of this is that when we ask Jesus to act, we should expect him to act through us; we should take our identity as the body of Christ seriously; we should expect that it has a practical outworking.

We are the body of Christ; Teresa of Avila understood this to mean that Christ has no body now but ours; that if the world is to have practical experience of the love of Christ, it has to be through what we do – through what the Church gives.

In her 2008 book, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism*, Elaine Heath makes it clear that it's only when the Church is spending

itself for others – not spending money on ourselves, but spending ourselves for others – it's only then that we're recognisable as the body of Christ (eg p.123) – it's only when the Church is spending itself for others that we're recognisable as the one who truly loves the needy and the persecuted; it's only when the Church is spending itself for others that we're recognisable as the healer, the provider.

I'm struck, in today's story, by the fact that the only source all that extra food could have come from was Christ's own body. And that challenges me and all of us to look at our priorities; to be clear with each other and with our Maker how we are to resource *our* mission as the Body of Christ – healer, provider, and lover of all.

Amen