

Year A, Proper 18: Matthew 14:13-21

You Feed Them - Where God is, there is Plenty

Today's gospel has us looking both backwards and forwards. We look backwards as the story reminds us of Moses when he was with the hordes of Israelites in the desert with nothing to feed them and God provides them with manna from heaven. We look forward as Jesus' deliberate act of blessing the bread, breaking it, and sharing it reminds us of the Holy Eucharist we partake in. This story of feeding the thousands is the only story of Jesus that is found in all four gospels. That tells us that it's really important. But why is it important?

In Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's famous musical [Jesus Christ Superstar](#), there is a scene where sick people come to Jesus asking to be healed. As he tries to touch them all, the crowd gets bigger and more urgent, and Jesus' attempts become more frantic and desperate, until finally, bursting away from them he cries out "heal yourselves!"

Who hasn't felt like this at times? Who, especially if we take the brokenness and need of the world seriously, hasn't felt overwhelmed and unable to give enough or be enough for what is needed. To portray Jesus in this way is to reflect our own sense of inadequacy and our inability to believe that Jesus could really have been as self-giving as the Gospels claim. But in today's gospel, it is precisely such a self-giving Jesus that we see. And it goes even further. Jesus not only manages to find what seems like super-human compassion within himself, he has the nerve to expect his disciples to share it and participate in it. He doesn't let us off the hook. This is why we need to hear this particular gospel story four times over. Because, again and again in life, we stand in the shoes of the disciples in this passage: surrounded by human need, faced with a challenge, knowing we do not have the resources, in our own wisdom, wealth, and strength, to meet the need, to stand up to the challenge. With the disciples, we say, "This is a deserted place". There isn't enough to go around. We sometimes feel our only option is to try not to see the needs, to ignore the challenge. What other choice do we have? We don't have what it takes to meet them. We have a "There is not enough" attitude.

In contrast to us, we have Jesus. Jesus is trying to get away into a lonely place to be by himself to process the news that his cousin and predecessor, John, has been executed by Herod for no good reason. Herod is hosting a birthday banquet feeding those who have no lack of food - and decides to reward his step-daughter

for her dancing by showing off to his guests. She can have anything she wants. So, at the urging of her mother, she asks for John's head on a platter. Herod's arrogance now comes back to haunt him - he has to go through with the execution because he made the promise boastfully and publicly. There is not the slightest hint of compassion in anyone in this story until we get to Jesus.

The crowds, who have seen Jesus leave, hurry around the lake and are waiting for him when he arrives on the other side. They need him and their need, rather than lead him to frustration or resentment, draws compassion out of him. One of my favourite authors, Tom Wright, points out that this is the first miracle in the story - and this is where *Jesus Christ Superstar* got it wrong. This ability to lay aside his own needs and offer compassion to others is what sets Jesus apart. He doesn't say, "Go away. I'm emotionally drained. I have nothing more to give." Jesus doesn't have the "Not enough" attitude. He believes that where God is, there is plenty.

After some time of ministry, the disciples, who are perhaps beginning to learn a little of Jesus' concern for others, ask him to send the crowds away because it is late and the people have no food. The scene is set now, in Matthew's narrative, for a contrast with Herod who has power and feels nothing for human struggle - and a comparison with Moses. As always, Matthew is seeking to reveal Jesus as a new Moses, come to bring a new (or fulfilled law) to God's people, to recreate God's people under a law that is not an outward display of rule following but rather a law that is written on the heart - the law of compassion, justice and peace.

While Herod feeds the well-fed, Jesus provides food for the hungry. But unlike the time of Moses, where God feeds the people with no help from humans, Jesus does not do the work - or take the glory - for himself. When the disciples note the hunger of the people, Jesus responds, "You feed them". They have seen the need, they have witnessed Jesus' compassion. Now, they are to step up and participate in his ministry. But, they are amazed and concerned. They have no resources to provide for such a huge crowd. They are of the "There is not enough" attitude. But Jesus simply asks them what resources they do have - and it doesn't amount to much - some bread and fish. But, this is what Jesus uses because he knows that where God is, there is plenty. He blesses it and breaks it (a foreshadowing of the sacrament) and then he gives it back to the disciples for them to distribute. In a crowd of this size, with no big screens to show them the actions at the front, it is likely that many people knew nothing more than that the disciples were feeding

them. Perhaps, only later did they hear that they had been participants in a miracle.

So it is the disciples who participate in the miracle as it unfolds. They're not sitting back watching - they are doing it. Not only does Jesus find the compassion in himself to meet the needs of the people in spite of his own grief and anxiety. He changes the hearts of those who follow him so that they too, are willing to sacrifice and share in order to meet one another's needs. Jesus is changing their "not enough" attitude into the knowledge that where God is, there is plenty. In spite of what seemed like not enough to go around, there is an abundance left over - twelve baskets, which could, perhaps represent the new twelve tribes of the new nation that Jesus was creating.

All of which leaves us in a rather uncomfortable place as we hear this story. In the first place, it challenges our reluctance to give of ourselves to others even when it hurts. It is a challenge to give up our inward looking "there is not enough" attitude that causes us to want the resources to flow into our church. That's not the message of the gospel. We are called to offer what meagre resources we do have - time, expertise, finances, friendship, creativity, compassion - to offer these to Jesus so that he can bless them, and break them, and give them back to us for us to distribute to those who need them. It is a vision of compassion that we are called to embrace and seek to live. And then, what we give out will come back in abundance.

And so, in writing *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Webber and Rice may have shown a limited faith in Jesus' capacity for compassion, but they revealed the struggle of the human heart to overcome our compassion fatigue and how easily we get overwhelmed by the need in the light of our small resources. Jesus understands our struggle - our fear that makes us hold on to our thinking that "There is not enough". But he provides us with the example and calls us to believe along with him that where God is, there is plenty. The next time we hear ourselves saying, "Lord, send them away. We don't have enough", let us also hear the reverberating reassurance of Jesus' compassionate command: "You feed them."