

ORDINARY SUNDAY 17: JULY 26th
2 Kings 4:42-44; John 6:1-15

2 Kings 4:42-44

This brief passage presents, in a shorthand form, much of the theological position of the Book of Kings. We are presented with a physical impossibility, a little bit of bread and a few husks of food to feed a hundred men. What enables them to overcome the physical problems is the “word of Yahweh”. The situation in which they find themselves is now being used by God to proclaim a central message: God can turn an impossible situation into an opportunity for victory – through his grace. The powerlessness of the group is central to what the authors are saying.

The statement the prophet puts into the mouth of God points us in the way we are to be thinking as we interpret the message. He says: *for Yahweh says this: they will eat and have some left over.* And that is exactly what happened. The men were satisfied. Their hunger was taken away....and there was some left over which they could use along the way. What God says actually happens.

When you put this miracle story into the context of the settlement of the land of Canaan we can begin to understand how reassuring this message was. The Hebrews were little more than a loose collection of tribes trying to take over the land from the warlike peoples who had already inhabited it and made it their own. They faced all kinds of difficulties and trials. They were attacked from outside and undermined by faithless people within their own ranks. Some stayed faithful to the God of their ancestors, while others dallied with the gods of Canaan. They had little hope of surviving let alone driving out their enemies.

But, spiritually they were held in check, with their eyes on the ultimate goals, by the promise that God would give them the land. It was a sign of his covenant with them and despite their problems, they had to believe that they would be victorious – if they allowed God to be the one who led them to victory. That is what we see in today’s story: God said they would be fed and they were fed.

That is also the message for us. There are many many things in the Church and in the world around us that suggest that we are losing the battle of proclaiming the Gospel and there is always the temptation to give up. Things are too hard, too uncertain and we can wonder just where we go from here. The answer is simple: God will feed us. Our problems can always be traced back to the idea that we taken to feeding ourselves, are going our own way and have moved God from the centre of our focus and activities. Nothing else will feed the Church but God and if we want food for the journey then we need to allow him to feed us.

John 6:1-16

This idea of being fed by God is exactly what is picked up in today’s Gospel story. John presents Jesus teaching his new covenant in the hills around the lake, in a way that brings to mind Moses and the teachings of the old covenant on Mt Sinai. He also links the event to the Passover, which is another illusion to the Exodus and so a pointer to how important this whole story is for John. What we find in Jesus is not just a new Moses but a whole new covenant relationship with God.

It begins in a way that is similar to the story from 2 Kings. There is a large crowd of hungry people and the question is asked: *How can we feed all of these people?* There is the key to what Jesus is about to teach. The disciples have reached the limits of their ability to meet the needs of the crowd, and, one would suspect, the limits of their understanding of what was truly going on in this man Jesus. Phillip summed up their situation well: *A year’s wages would not earn us enough money to buy food for all of these people!* It is over. It is all too much, the crowds will have to go hungry.

But surely that is not why the Father sent the Son? He came so that he could be the Bread of Life and one suspects that in Andrew’s reply there is something of an understanding that Jesus is not going to be limited by human weaknesses and understandings for he commented that *there is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish.* But even Andrew has his limitations for he has to add *but what is that among so many?* He wants to believe that Jesus can be the way out of the problem but is stuck with his own immature faith.

We can imagine him in an *Oh....if only all of this was true, that Jesus was who he says he is.....* but then reality comes crashing in on him and he reverts back to being a man of surface faith.

Jesus has the disciples break the crowd up into groups and gets them seated around him on the ground. The image is a bit like the twelve reclining with Jesus at the Last Supper and even the words and actions of Jesus are reflective of both the Jewish Passover prayers and the early Christian eucharistic prayers. What we have here is a great deal more than just a physical feeding, though that happens. The crowd eat their fill and even after they had eaten to meet their hunger, there was still food left over.

Unlike the other Gospels, this story begins with Jesus noticing that the crowd is hungry. He is the one who is concerned about the need to feed the starving people while in the other Gospels it is the disciples who come to Jesus and point out the problem. For John, one of the roles of Jesus is the feeding of God's people. Like Moses who asks Yahweh: *Where am I going to get meat for all of these people?* Jesus asks *How are we going to buy enough bread?* even though he already knows what he is going to do. It is all a part of testing the disciples and the testing of the Church reading the story. Back in 4:34 Jesus had already told his followers that *my food is to do the will of the One who sent me and to complete his work.* There we have the contrast set out for us: Andrew and Phillip, who have been with Jesus from the beginning, still do not understand what is going on with this Jesus character. They have already forgotten what Jesus said about his mission being his food and are focussed only on the physical, the practical on what can be understood in human terms. Jesus, on the other hand, is about his Father's business and has the feeding of the crowd as his only desire.

What Jesus does in this story is what God has said that he will do to his needy people. In Psalm 23 we are told that *He will make me lie down in green pastures...* This is what happens here. In John alone are we told that the crowd is made to sit down on green grass, a little note that is missing from the other Gospel accounts. And we can also see that Psalm 23 is fulfilled: *The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.* That is surely what has happened here. The crowd do not go hungry. They are fed and there is still plenty left over for their future wants and needs.

Conclusion:

This story presents us with an insight into how John understood the ministry of Jesus. He is the one sent by God to feed those who are hungry. But that feeding is not a one off event. In the Exodus God fed the people of Israel with manna but they were not allowed to store that manna. They had to collect it each day. Not so here with the feeding offered by Jesus. They collected it and the apostles were given responsibility for keeping it safe so that the people could continue to be fed in the future, when the Son of Man was no longer among them. This they did as the Twelve a ministry that the Church saw as continuing in the ministry of the bishops. They were the custodians of the gifts of Jesus to a hungry world.

To be able to access this food of heaven, we need to be hungry and unable to feed ourselves. The starting point for sharing in this miraculous feeding is always an inability to resolve our own hungers, our own needs, to feel as though we are struggling with our limitations and weaknesses. It is then and only then that Jesus steps in and offers us what we have no hope of achieving on our own. That is as true of the individual as it is of the entire Church and the local faith community.

What is truly interesting is what this miracle does for the crowd. They are excited about the signs and wonders they saw in this miracle and want to make him their king. But Jesus is not willing to accept this kind of praise and there is no way that he is going to allow his ministry to be controlled by how they think a messiah should be acting and to do what they think he should be doing. They want a political solution to their problems. They want a messiah who will be their messiah, one they can control, understand and direct. That is not the way of God and it misses the whole point of this story.

Like the people in the old testament story, it is about **being fed**. It is about trusting in God that when he says he will lead us into green pastures, will bring us to rest and find refreshment beside cool streams. That when he promises we need fear nothing, that is exactly what he means and exactly what he will do. The opposite is to set out to resolve our problems by human means and be driven by human ambitions and human motives. That will do nothing more than leave us perpetually hungry.

As a Church, these readings offer us great hope. God is feeding us. If we are hungry it is more likely to be because we are not able to allow ourselves to be led to his divine food as we are too busy feeding ourselves. But even more importantly is that we share in the ministry of the Son. We are to be feeders of the peoples of our time, of our communities. It is not enough that we are fed. We are fed so that we in turn can take of the surplus food left over by Jesus and feed the hungry in the world. Nothing less is expected of us. And that is not a bad point for reflection over the coming week.