

# *the abundance of God*

a sermon preached on the

*ninth sunday after pentecost*

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at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

*by the reverend helen creed*

the lections: 2 Kings 4: 42-44; Psalm 145: 10-18; Ephesians 3: 14-21; John 6: 1-21

The story of the feeding of the crowd is one of those stories that found favour with each of the gospel writers. Indeed Mark and his community liked it so much they included it twice: the feeding of the 5000 in chapter 6 of that gospel and the feeding of the 4000 in chapter 8!

Today we hear John's version of the story and our lectionary invites us to see the way this story takes up a plot already set out in the second book of Kings. Elisha, the man of God in the Kings reading, is replaced by Jesus, "the prophet who is to come into the world", in John's story. The man who offers Elisha the first fruits of his harvest, "20 loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack", has his equivalent in John as a boy who has "five barley loaves and two fish". While it is Elisha's *servant* who expresses his dismay at the idea that 20 loaves can feed 100 people (saying "how can I set this before one hundred people?"), it is the disciple Philip is dismayed in John's story, pointing out that it is not possible, emphatically not possible to buy bread for such a crowd ("Six months wages would not buy enough bread . . ." we can hear him spluttering!). In the gospel story we also have Andrew pointing out that it's ridiculous to consider the *boy's* offering as a solution.

So we can see that these stories, written thousands of years apart have a number of themes in common, namely God's commitment to feeding us – and our scepticism about whether it's possible to feed everyone. But, as they say, the proof is in the pudding! In both stories, the crowds eat until they are satisfied, and there are certainly no reduced serving sizes here!

I'm no economist but I think one of the key concepts in economics is scarcity – but, as John presents it here, in the kingdom ruled by God there is no scarcity, we don't need to compete for food of any kind, there is enough for all and some left over.

When I was discussing this story with a year 10 student last year, she said that what must have happened on this occasion was that when the crowd saw the boy offer his food, everyone else must have decided to share what they had, meager as it was. So the sharing caught on, there

was a “contagion of sharing”, if you like, and *that’s* the miracle of the story. . . I quite like that take on the story, but I also think it misses something – that “something happened” in the breaking of the bread that is beyond ordinary explanations, and that we need to take whatever that was seriously if we are to be opened up to the truth of what it means to be blessed by God.

I would like to explore this story with you today by asking you to imagine that it was *you* Jesus turned to that day on the mountain . . . “When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him” (a crowd of thousands), Jesus said to you . . . “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?”

What do you say to Jesus?

And when a boy comes up with a basket containing five loaves and two fish and offers it for the people to eat, what do you say to him?

And, one more question, do you communicate the offer the boy makes to Jesus, or not?

Let’s spend a moment exploring the dilemma you face.

You have been travelling with Jesus – you have witnessed people being made whole, including a man who has been ill for 38 years . . . and you were also there when Jesus turned the water into wine at the wedding. This was, after all, a rather big clue about what is a priority for Jesus: providing for his friends. In other words, you have seen some of the splendour, you have glimpsed what Paul calls in his letter to the Ephesians, “the breadth and length and height and depth” of God’s love . . . There are a number of reasons then, why your response to Jesus might be full of trust and the glad anticipation of tummies being filled.

But, on the other hand, none of us want to be naïve, do we, especially we don’t want to be *seen* to be naïve? And given all the disappointments of our lives, perhaps we also don’t want to hope for too much, we might think we can’t bear another disappointment – better to adjust our hopes and settle for something much less. So rather than “going with the flow”, rather than following, trusting, risking, adventuring – we might choose instead to hesitate, to question Jesus; to say, nice idea, but we are just not equipped for this. And in all of this hesitation, we might also save ourselves from looking foolish, save ourselves from the embarrassment of promising so much but not being able to deliver.

So, how do these stories we have heard this morning, speak into our dilemmas and our often equal and opposite reactions to the call of Jesus to us? Two points.

First, these stories remind us, that in God’s kingdom there is enough for everyone and some left over. The prophet Elisha knows it (remember he says to his servant, with quiet confidence, “they shall eat and have some left”), & Jesus knows it . . . that’s why he tells the crowd to sit down and relax, to prepare to be fed.

Second, these stories remind us that God can do wonderful things with whatever we offer, even out of the poverty of our lives, when we feel we have so little that will make a difference, whether concrete resources or spiritual resources. And God will never despise an offering that is heartfelt: it’s not heroic gestures that God delights in, just real ones. The prophet Elisha knows it (that’s why he doesn’t reject the man’s offering); Jesus knows it (that’s why he calmly accepts the boy’s offering) . . . and the boy in the crowd on the mountain that day also knew it. Who knows

what that child had seen or heard that has brought him this knowledge, but he trusts in the possibilities Jesus opens up.

I imagine many of us are here in church today because there has been a moment when we have glimpsed the magnificence of the love of God; here, because at some point, our lives have opened up in ways beyond our asking or our imagining . . .and I don't mean here just the opening up of our external circumstances, but of our inner lives.

My real question today is this: How have we let those glimpses of the "breadth and length and height and depth of God's love" shape our outlook and our attitudes, our trust in what might be?

Well, we're probably like Andrew and Philip and Elisha's servant quite a lot of the time: hesitant, wanting to play it safe, not really trusting God's provision in Christ. But there are probably times when we are also like the boy in the crowd: our hearts full of trust and hope, stirred by the possibilities of we know not what, but ready to offer what we have, however small that may be.

As we hold out our hands to receive the bread and the wine today, let us pray that over time, encouraged by the faith of those around us and the work of God within us, that we will grow more and more like the boy in the crowd, *trusting* that the place where all are fed, and where there's some left over, is not too far away; and let us pray that, like the boy, we will be ready to offer what we have, and who we are, to the God who loves to feed us, to whom be all glory and praise. Amen.