

THE NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

26 July 2015

Year B

Feeding of the Five Thousand

2 Kings 4:42-44; Psalm 14; Ephesians 3: 14-21; John 6:1-21

“Against all odds” is certainly an expression that would fit the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. Were Mpho Lakasi to tell this story in his television series it would surely show how Jesus helped those in the crowd who had resources to share them. That I believe it is the fundamental lesson of the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. Its importance in the life and teaching of Jesus is shown in the fact that it is in all four Gospels. In fact it is the only miracle story that in John’s Gospel which is also found in the earlier Gospels.

Although there are those who try to argue that we must not undermine the miraculous by this interpretation, because it questions the divine power in Jesus to multiply the loaves and fishes, I believe such an interpretation of the event reflects a magical understanding of the event. It does not reflect the incarnational nature of Jesus’ life and teaching which was to change us from within so that we may act in accordance with God’s Spirit revealed to us in him.

If we have a magical understanding of God’s action in the Feeding it would lead to an expectation that God acts by intervening from outside in a magical way. But God in Jesus works from inside. In the Acts of the Apostles Luke tells us of the selfless generosity and the spontaneous sharing of the Christians after Pentecost.

All the believers agreed to hold everything in common; they began to sell their property and possessions and distribute to everyone in his need and breaking bread in their homes, they shared their meals with unaffected joy..
(Acts 2:44-46)

The whole company of the believers was united in heart and soul. Not one of them claimed any of his possessions as his own; everything was held in common There was never a needy person among them. (Acts 4:32-34)

We are rather shocked to read that when Ananias and his wife Sapphira, when confronted by Peter, admit that they have retained some of their possessions, they are struck down dead! Rather harsh and uncalled for in a Christian community, we think. But is it? Is it not the direct result of their wanting to retain, cling to their material possessions as their security in life, as we all do? And is it not a warning about the spiritual death of such an attitude? Does the myth of the origin of sin and death not tell of the same judgement on those who tried to seek independence by wanting to be in charge of their own lives and not recognised it as a gift to be shared, received from the source of life whose nature is grace and generosity? All life is dependent on that grace and generosity. Death is in seeking to save our lives.

Jesus would not seek to influence people or seek recognition by the miraculous provision of food. He had resisted that temptation right at the beginning of his ministry when the Devil tempted him to do so. His problem with that type of divine handout was that he would be looked upon as the perpetual provider. People would look beyond themselves for a Saviour and not within themselves for salvation. And that is precisely what happened. Jesus fled because they wanted to make him a king. (John 6:15)

Jesus, realizing that they meant to come and seize him to proclaim him king, withdrew again to the hills by himself,

When first Christians declared that Jesus is Lord, they did not sit around expecting to be catered for by some divine intervention. They learnt that the divine intervention was in their own change of heart and understanding of human community.

Paul appeals to the same spirit which inspired the sharing reported in Acts when he writes about the generosity of Macedonian Christians in his second letter to the Corinthians, using their example to motivate the Corinthians to be generous in their support for the Church in Jerusalem. Paul speaks of the troubles the Christians in Macedonia had faced and mentions that they were not rich in the material sense, but spiritually abundantly blessed so that they insisted that they share in a generous service to their fellow Christians. It is a paradoxical fact that the poor are much more willing to share than the rich.

People look for change from outside, but they look in vain. Like the attempts to lose weight by taking some expensive potion, when what one needs to do is to eat less and exercise more. Significant and lasting change in life always comes from within not from outside. It is usually triggered by some external event which challenges our way of life and relationships. But for the change to be effective in our lives we have to internalize the dynamic which brings about the change. Christians believe that our spiritual health comes from a change from within as God is revealed to be working within us to redeem and restore us. We call it incarnation. God works from within.

This is illustrated in the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand. Crowds flock to Jesus. They follow him because they believe that he is the saviour, whether as a political hope to get rid of Roman oppression, or a religious hope in transforming the oppression of the religious system of their day or for healing of their diseases. In this instance the crowd is in a rural setting country. In John's version Jesus asks the disciples (Philip & Andrew) where they will find food for the multitude. Impossible is their answer. Not even a year's wages would be enough to buy bread for all the people. All they have noticed is that there is a boy with five barley loaves and two boggoms. What is that among so many? It does not mean that there were no others who like the boy had brought provisions – after all there were five thousands men apart from women and children.

Jesus asks the disciples to get the people to sit down. No pushing and shoving when the food will become available. Then he takes what the boy has brought and says a prayer of thanks to God.; breaks the bread and fish and asks the disciples to distribute the pieces to those around. A miracle happens. The people find they have enough to eat and even an abundance of excess. What has happened is that they shared what they had brought after the example of Jesus. Well, that is what the first Christian community believed God was asking them to do with their resources. And where would they have learnt that?

But even more central was the fact that the life of God is expressed in this act of giving so that it may be blessed broken and distributed to feed others. John tells us that this event took place at the time of the Passover. He has no record of the Last Supper before the crucifixion. This is John's account of the Last Supper that became

the central act of Christian celebration of the presence of God among and within them in Jesus Christ. Jesus says “I am the bread of life” In using the term “I am” John is proclaiming that Jesus claimed to be an expression of the God “Yahweh” “I am who I am, I will be who I will be”. John after all asserts that Jesus said that he and the Father are one. (John 1.4: 1-7)

To share we have to let go of what we have so that it may be used for the blessing, the nurture of others. What the boy had brought was hopelessly inadequate to feed five thousand people. What he did by offering it to Jesus enabled five thousand to be fed. So too when we offer to God what we may consider to be inadequate God makes it adequate.

Taking, blessing, breaking and giving is the four action shape of the Eucharist in which we share in Holy Communion. It consists fundamentally in the act of the gracious God, offered for blessing in a great prayer of thanksgiving, breaking the bread so that it can be distributed for the nurture of ourselves and others.

We come with ourselves, the bread and fishes that are our gifts. They are given to God to be blessed, broken and given as our contribution to the life of God in Christ – the holy communion, the communion which God creates in Jesus Christ.

Here we are fed and here we are called to feed others by our offering in the offering of love of God for the spiritual nurture of the all. When this happens there is abundant life.

John uses this story as the basis for his teaching on the meaning of the institution of the Holy Communion as the central and essential act of Christian life and witness.

Let go and let God is Jesus message in his life and teaching. That is the attitude, which is and will be the salvation of the world. When we stop clinging for security to our life and possessions and seek life in the community of sharing which comes from a willingness to let go and a faith which believes that when we do that God can and does use us in blessing and enables us to experience the abundance of God’s grace.

The mystic Meister Eckhart referred to it as “ the birth of God in the soul”

This is precisely what the writer of the letter to the Ephesians meant when he wrote in the passage we read as the second lesson at this service(Eph.3:21)

Now to him who is able through the power of the Holy Spirit at work among us to do immeasurable more than we ask or conceive, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus from generation to generation. AMEN.