

Pentecost 10 2018

A few years ago I had to give a seminary class a Bible verse to take with them as they left and headed out into the world. It could be any verse from the entire Bible, so there were many tempting options.

Appropriate for the end of a long period of study was Ecclesiastes 12.12: "Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh." Useful for ensuring they didn't annoy people in their new parishes was Proverbs 27:14: "If a person loudly blesses their neighbour early in the morning, it will be taken as a curse." Popular with the Episcopalians at least was Ecclesiasticus 31:28: "Wine drunk at the proper time and in moderation is rejoicing of heart and gladness of soul." But in the end I went for my old favourite, John 10.10: "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly."

This call to abundance, echoed in our gospel miracle, feels extra important just now. I was very struck by something one of the participants in our civil discourse program said last week. He was talking about having conversations with people who disagree with him – in his case this meant people in the right wing – and he went on to say: "It's when they say 'I'm a Christian' that I really give up. I know they're not going to listen to me."

What a sad reputation for us Christians to have! Close minded, afraid of argument, living in a guarded world in which we are right and everyone else is wrong. Seeing truth as a vulnerable scarcity that has to be protected from any disagreement.

Christians aren't alone in this. We live in a world predicated on scarcity; on the need to compete for the available resources in the understanding that there is not enough to go around. The rarer something is the more value is attached to it – the more exclusive a resort the more expensive. Consumerism calls us to focus on all the places where there is not enough to go round. We look for lack and we find lack. Abundance is a wonderfully counter-cultural concept.

Which is why this miracle story of the feeding of the 5000 is such a wake-up call for us. It is, par excellence, the miracle of abundance – one boy's small picnic satisfying the hunger of a multitude. It is also the most often repeated miracle story in the gospels. John's gospel alone has two versions of it, and it is the only miracle which appears in all four gospels. This is significant, the repetition tells us, think about this. This is more than a sweet story to tell to children – this has something to teach us, this matters.

Ok, so what does it teach us? Something about old-fashioned, under-rated, un-cynical, un-ironic faith and trust. Significantly it is a child who facilitates the miracle. A child who offers all that they have, meager though that is, without worrying about whether it will be enough. A child who knows that they can't solve the whole problem but who doesn't let this knowledge stop them doing what they can. A child who has yet to learn the limitations of the world and who does what is right just because it is right.

We can get caught up on the logistics of this miracle – did Jesus miraculously multiply those loaves and fishes, or did the child's generosity lead everyone to share the food they had been saving for themselves? I am rationally inclined to the latter, but as a true fan of the miracle of the incarnation I won't rule out the former – when God becomes human anything can happen! But, in either case, knowing the how is not the point.

The point is knowing that where God is there is abundance. To be with God is to be satisfied. To be in God's commonwealth of love is to be in a place shot through with, characterized by, overflowing with abundance. This is the point that is to change us, and give us a new model to live by.

If we stay in a world-scape of scarcity we can find ourselves repeating the sort of behaviour that King David showed in our first reading. That self-regarding desperation to satisfy our own needs and desires that treats others as if they are means to our ends rather than full human beings in their own right. The selfishness that eyes the whole world as a resource to be exploited rather than a gift to be cherished. That sees worth and beauty as in such short supply that we need to snatch them for ourselves and gobble them up and to hell with whoever stands in our way.

So how do we live differently? How do we take abundance rather than scarcity as our starting point? Without just taking a Pollyanna view of reality and closing our eyes to the real shortages and deprivations that do exist? It ain't easy, but it is important and challenging and holy and central to our choice to follow Christ.

First of all we consider what it takes for us to be satisfied. Not to be replete, not to have everything we could possibly want – my own list is pretty endless!, but to have enough – to be enough. And we live accordingly. Seeking out the things that really fill our hearts and give joy to our lives – friendship, love, meaning, purpose, a relationship with the divinity who creates and delights in us. Refusing to believe that happiness lies in acquiring more and more and more stuff.

Think back. What is your happiest memory? One that still makes your soul smile? I may be wrong, but I'm betting it is to do with relationship or nature or accomplishment and not the moment when you bought your favourite dress or car or latest Apple gadget. One of mine is walking on a sunlit hilltop with the wind blowing my hair every which-way and my husband's hand in mine. That was a moment of true abundance!

Secondly, we open our eyes to see the five thousand, the many millions, around us and to feel their needs as our own. We see the hunger of the world and at the same time we see the wealth of the world. So we give, knowing there actually is enough for all; we campaign, helping others see there is enough for all; we recycle, take transit, have shorter showers so there will continue to be enough for all. Each individual action may seem vanishingly small, compared to the needs of our world. But that is how living abundantly happens: not through grand gestures, but by living day by day, at ninety degree to our culture.

And to make that living strong and joyful we do a third thing - we offer everything to God. That's the scariest part, the wonderful, mystic, non-sensible part. Like the child in the miracle story, we take all that we were relying on to feed us and we put it into God's hands. Trusting that we will still be given all that we need in return. Echoing my favourite words from the English marriage service: "All that I am I give to you, and all that I have I share with you." Knowing we are offering ourselves to one who loves us and cares for us more completely and thoroughly and gently than even our beloved partners and friends.

And lastly, we come to this table. Where a small piece of bread and sip of wine are enough to bring God's life to life in us. Where the holiest of food is shared with any who hold out their hands. Where, in a true image of abundance, all are fed and no one, no one, is denied.