

Readings for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

28th July 2024

First Reading: 2Kings 4:42-44

A man came bringing food from the first fruits to Elisha, the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, 'Give it to the people and let them eat.' But his servant said, 'How can I set this before a hundred people?' So he repeated, 'Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the LORD, "They shall eat and have some left."' He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the LORD.

Second Reading: Ephesians 3:14-21

I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Gospel: St John

Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing.

When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

A Reflection for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

How often do you talk about the weather? I am conscious that I do it quite a lot. A study reported in The Independent newspaper in 2018 calculated that the average Briton will spend four and half months of his or her life talking about the weather – quite a thought! Reasons suggested included that the weather is a non-threatening subject for small talk; that it has a significant effect on our mood, so we are conscious of it; and that the location of the British Isles means that our weather is particularly variable, influenced by both the ocean to the west and continent to the east, and airflows from both the Arctic and the Tropics. Personally, I prefer the last of those reasons – it makes weather seem more reasonable as a topic of conversation!

Having said that, I'm pretty certain that most of what I have to say about the weather is pretty banal. I certainly didn't enjoy the exceptional amount of rain we experienced in June and early July, nor the rather cool temperatures, and I moaned about it like many other people. But I was reminded by Fr David, in his intercessions at the end of June, that we should be grateful for the rain. It means we have a plentiful water supply and live in a green and pleasant land. There are many others in this world who would wonder why we complain, people living in places where lack of rain or excessively high temperatures put their very lives at risk.

Of course, climate is complex; different areas have always had different temperature ranges and amounts of rainfall, as well as the cycles of the earth's seasons and geological cycles that impact climate. Human impact is a more recent factor, and clearly significant, but also complex. But the rain we receive is an example of God's abundant generosity to us, a plenteous supply of the literal water of life.

The feeding of the five thousand, in today's Gospel, is a familiar story of God's abundant generosity. Less familiar, perhaps, is the story from the life of the prophet Elisha which prefigures the Gospel. Elisha was successor to Elijah as the main prophet in Israel in about the 9th century BCE. At that time, there were various guilds of prophets in different places, and Elisha was with one such group when he received a substantial gift of food. This was given to him because he was famous, 'the man of God', rather than having been earned or deserved in some way. He could have stored up this abundance for a rainy day, but instead he chose to share it with the people he was with, to make sure they had something to eat. In doing so, he demonstrated his trust in God's provision.

Meanwhile, his servant fretted, concerned that there wouldn't be enough. He was just like the disciples in the later Gospel account. A large crowd had been following Jesus around, showing up everywhere he went and bringing many sick people to him for healing. We are told that Jesus asked Philip 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' in order to test him. Philip was anxious about the cost of feeding so many people, and six months wages for an unskilled labourer was probably an underestimate of the true cost of doing so. It was an unimaginable sum. Andrew's suggestion, that they use the boy's picnic of five barley loaves and two fish, is another ridiculous solution. How could it possibly provide enough? But, like Elisha before him, Jesus too wanted those around him to

understand the abundance of God's provision, abundance that takes the smallest of offerings and makes it more than sufficient, with basketfuls of leftovers.

It is, perhaps, not quite so extraordinary as it seems. Similar miracles occur each time a church organises a bring-and-share meal – there is always an abundance of food as people share generously, and usually many leftovers!

The Eucharist that we share is another example of God's generous hospitality, a sacrament in which we become what we consume, the body of Christ, a people sharing God's extravagant love in the world. A sacrament that is open to all people, which crosses all boundaries, which proclaims love without limit or condition.

So, as Christians, like the disciples, we are called to trust in God's abundant provision and reflect God's generosity in the way we share with others.

Does fear of impossibility paralyse us, or do we offer what we have been given and use it generously as it is needed, trusting God to do what seems impossible to us? Or are there limits to our generosity - some things that we are not prepared to be so generous with? It's something to ponder, because what God intended was enough for everyone – not necessarily equal, but enough. Yet that patently isn't the situation we find as we look at the world, so we should ask ourselves, what miracle might God work through what I have to offer?

Paul's beautiful prayer for the Ephesians could be a prayer for us all. He prays that they may be strengthened in their inner being with power through the Spirit, that Christ may dwell in their hearts. It is that inner strength that allows us to survive and flourish in the life of faith, to trust in God's generous provision.

He prays that they will be rooted and grounded in love, knowing the love of Christ that is beyond human knowledge, and filled with all the fulness of God. It is Christ's love that roots and grounds Christian lives. Filled with all the fulness of God is like an image of a cup brimming over, enabling and underpinning our love for one another, giving us the will to share God's generosity with others.

Paul concludes by reminding the Ephesians that the power of God is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine. God can do far more than we can possibly imagine; not just a little bit more ... abundantly more.

This was a prayer to strengthen and encourage the Ephesians, particularly when they were facing adversity. It is a prayer for us to offer for each other and all those we love. And it is a reminder that our part is to trust in those promises of God, to offer what we are able and let God take care of the miracles.