

Year B, Proper 12, 2009

2 Kings 4: 42-44
Ps 145: 10-19
Ephesians 3: 14-21
John 6: 1-21

That story, the feeding of the five thousand, is well known. Scholars argue whether it is factual, or merely symbolic, but I find myself not overly bothered: its power is symbolic whether or not it is factual. We have:

- Christ the distributor of bread to the hungry, that is to say, the bread of life, spiritual food.
- The fish representing the fruits of God's creation, gathered by the labour of the disciples, and so the labour of our hands.
- The crossing of the lake to the other side, gentile, side tells us that the word of Christ is for all us sinners, not just the respectable churchgoers.
- And it is there for the whole world, represented by the five thousand, special significance of five in Biblical numerology.
- In all this, the allusion to the Eucharist is clear enough (takes the loaves, gives thanks, breaks them, distributes them).
- The richness, the prodigality, of divine gifts.
- Do not be afraid! Jesus' most oft-heard words.

But it is none of these that I want to reflect on this morning. Neither is it telling you that Susan and I have been to that place. January 2008, the green hillside at the north end of the Sea of Galilee, near the site of Capernaum. Not all this, though that is itself interesting, and I have nice pics I could show you.

No – none of that, but a minor detail that engages me today. This story is much the same in all four gospels, except for one small detail you heard this morning, only in John's Gospel. Only John tells us that the five loaves and two small fish are provided by a *paidarion*, the Greek for child or young servant. Yes: the bread of life comes from the hands of a child. Why is it there in John, when the other writers don't mention it?

It conjures up some resonances!

- A little child shall lead them (Isaiah 11.6).
- Allow the children to come to me.
- If anyone hurts a child, it would be better for that person to be thrown into the water with a stone around his neck.
- To enter the kingdom of heaven you must be as a child.

What is it about children that is so important to salvation? Here are some characteristics:

- straightforward
- trusting
- direct, unhampered by so-called politeness and 'good manners'
- push at boundaries to explore (Quaker)
- full of energy

The openness and open-mindedness of children puts me in mind of one of my favourite images of what we seek: enlightenment, freedom from ignorance. Such freedom comes from being fully aware of what exactly is going on in and around us, with open eyes and minds: mindfulness.

This is a difficult thing for us adults to aspire to. The 'freshness' of the child within us has been obscured by accretions of 'adulthood' that gather around the core. Layers that come from pride, wilfulness, selfishness, thoughtlessness, self-deception, pretence, puffed-upness. We tell ourselves that we need these things to get on in life, to crawl up the greasy career pole, to please other people. I know – I've been there. All these things mar the image of innocence within – innocence, I mean what the word means: lacking in harm. Not naïve, not unsophisticated, but simply lacking in harm.

Our hearts are hardened by life. Scarred. Solidified. Frozen in ice. All encasing that innocence, that straightforwardness within.

Let's strip away these casings. Let the warmth in. Warmth of the sun, warmth of the son. Light brings warmth.

Self-examination is about letting the light, the warmth, into your soul. Getting to know myself means peeling away the thick skins that have grown up around the divine core within, childlike free from pretence.

Later in this liturgy we will each of us have a personal interview with the Lord, in the Holy Sacrament. What will he see? He is love, so why be afraid? Maybe we are not so much afraid as ashamed. If God is love, and love is God, we don't need to be ashamed. Are we afraid that by letting someone into our lives we are in some way diminished? Not so, said the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI at his inauguration: 'Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return.'

Let the warmth in. Warmth hatches chicks. We need hatching of our hearts. Or, if you prefer the frozen-heart analogy, our hearts melt in the warmth. Strangely warmed, as John Wesley said. Warm the shell of grumpy self preoccupation until it breaks, and we see the world again through child-like eyes.

Hatching of the heart is not going to happen until we pause, rest, are still – to let it happen.

I sent RR14 to the usual crowd earlier this week, including Hugh in Texas, who wrote back:

*hi dad read rr14. v good. ... i think we have lost the ability to balance. our equilibrium is off. ... i can't remember the last time i witnessed somebody making a good balanced unbiased decision.
... i think the phrase godly righteous and sober life is the thing, sober is the way forward, well considered thought out and balanced.
... the email doesn't even come close to saying what it was supposed to, but when you get started its hard to stay on point which i think was about listening. inner peace - it is in the listening that i heal. the problem is that the noise is deafening.*

It makes one proud to be a dad.

Listening to the quiet, letting the heart be warmed and hatched in the light of Christ, is a daily discipline. Listening in silence is prayer. There are other ways of hatching too: coming to church is hatching with others - battery hatching, if you like! Journal writing, or walking, are other ways. Acts of compassion, or social protest are other ways.

What ever ways you choose, attend to your heart. Listen to others. Be quiet and listen to yourself.

Let me tell you a story.

Once upon a time ...
The Snow Queen.
Kay and Gerda reunited. Wholeness restored.
Tears of love melting the heart of ice so that we attain eternity.

O my Saviour, lifted
from the earth for me,
draw me, in thy mercy,
nearer unto thee.

**Speed these lagging footsteps,
melt this heart of ice
as I scan the marvels
of thy sacrifice.**

Lift my earth-bound longings,
fix them, Lord, above;
draw me with the magnet
of thy mighty love.

Lord, thine arms are stretching
ever far and wide,
to enfold thy children
to thy loving side.

And I come, O Jesus:
dare I turn away?
No, thy love hath conquered,
and I come today,

bringing all my burdens,
sorrow, sin, and care;
at thy feet I lay them,
and I leave them there.

The verse in bold is absent in all English hymn books. But it is there in the Church of Ireland book. It is there in the original. It is magical.