

## **Trinity 8 (Proper 13)**

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Revd Tim Barker, at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Sunday 2 August 2020

*Readings: Romans 9 vv 1-5 and Matthew 14 vv 13-21*

I confess to having rather mixed views about picnics. Growing up in Cheshire, the main holiday destination was north Wales, with the magnificent beaches of Anglesey and the Lleyn Peninsular (of course, not as good as the Guernsey beaches). I'm sure that the sun shone sometimes, but the prevailing memory of beach picnics is of sandwiches with a distinct emphasis on the sand which the Irish Sea winds blew off the beach and into our lunch.

Another memory of picnics is of the interest shown by wasps in what we were eating.

But picnics can be much more fun. On the top of a mountain after a satisfying scramble to the top. Or fresh food bought just a few minutes previously in a village market.

Today's gospel reading tells us about a joyous picnic. This was such an important event that it is one of only a few stories told in each of the four gospels.

What does this miracle tell us? First, that Jesus was worried and 'his heart was moved with pity' for the whole person, body and soul. He distributes the word to the soul, and he offers healing and food to the body.

So why doesn't he still do that today? Why doesn't he multiply bread for the many millions who are starving on the earth?

At first sight, a reasonable question. But we need to remember that one of the temptations involved the ever-so-attractive option of turning stones into bread to feed the hungry. That won't do.

There is a detail in this gospel that can help us to find the answer to these questions. Jesus does not snap his fingers so that bread and fish appear (as it were) magically at will. He asked his disciples what they had. He then invited them to share what they had: five loaves of bread and two fish.

Jesus does the same today. He asks us to share the resources of the earth. At least in regard to the supply of food, the earth would be able to support significantly more people than presently inhabit the earth, if we were more selective in what we ate and if there were less waste and better global distribution.

So how can we accuse God of not furnishing enough bread for everyone when every year we destroy millions of tons of food (stuff of which we arrogantly say we have 'too much') so as to prevent food prices from falling or because we have bought too much to use for ourselves? Remember the scandal of hoarding and over-buying at the beginning of lockdown. What is the solution? Better distribution, greater solidarity and more sharing.

I know it's not quite so straightforward. We have devised complex economic systems. In many countries, food supply relies on a complex production and distribution chain. There are irresponsible government leaders who keep many people hungry. Think North Korea. But part of the responsibility is on the shoulders of the rich countries; that is, we who waste food because it is so readily available.

The miracle starts with the disciples admitting that they have five loaves of bread and two fish; they cannot see that this is enough to feed a great crowd. It is just as easy for those who have more than enough food to hold on to what we have, lest this be shared with everyone and we find ourselves running short. But there is still enough for everyone, unless we continue to destroy the planet entrusted to us.

What happens next, once the availability of the loaves and fish is recognised, is described carefully: 'Taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, Jesus said the blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples'. The multiplication of the loaves and fish has always made us think of the multiplication of that other bread, which is the body of Christ.

For this reason the most antique representations of the Eucharist are of a basket containing loaves of bread and, on the sides, two fish, like the mosaic discovered in Tabgha in Palestine, in the church erected on the supposed site of the multiplication of the loaves, or in the famous fresco in the catacombs of Priscilla.

In this service, we are fed with the Word of God and with the literal bread and wine of the Eucharist.

There remains this task: 'picking up the fragments left over,' and making them available to those who did not participate in the banquet.

August begins with Lammas Day – the third of the old agricultural festivals, after the blessing of the plough in January and the prayers for the blessing of the crops and animals at rogationtide. Lammas was the day when a loaf baked with flour from newly harvested corn would be brought into church and blessed.

We recognise our dependence on God and his creation for the food we eat. We have plenty. Many have little.

God calls us to be active in ensuring that we are wise stewards of the resources of the world, which God has entrusted to us. God our creator and redeemer calls us to work with him in ensuring that all can receive the benefits of his generous creation – and in proclaiming the good news of the hope that is ours in and through Jesus.