

Year B, Proper 17, 28th July 2024

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

Enfolded in Love, Living in the 'above' world

In our gospel reading we have the oh so familiar story of the feeding of the five thousand and can switch off to some of the important aspects of this passage.

There is an innocuous verse of six words. Verse four states, 'The Jewish Passover was near.' Why did John include that detail? Several commentators suggest it is to reference back to the turning point in the history of the Jews, a miraculous meal instituted and commanded by God which initiated the Jews being led out of Egypt, from slavery into freedom, from death to life. Six little words – that we can so easily miss. And they provide us with a frame or lens through which we are to understand this next miraculous meal. I know I have skipped past that sentence as I wanted to get to the dialogue and action. But, in the process, I missed something incredibly important; John's framing of the story of us, the readers, and us the listeners.

Jesus has a conversation with Philip, which really is a way of testing him. Clearly, this is about the power of Jesus, about where the bread will come from to feed all these people. If we think back into the earlier stories in John's gospel, we know the chief steward at the wedding in Cana did not know where the wine came from, just as the women at the well in Samaria didn't know where the living water would come from. Philip doesn't know quite yet. Philip is busy estimating the cost of buying bread for all those on the hillside and is clearly dismayed at the amount of money it would cost, even if there was a bread shop close by that could meet the demand for so much bread.

A young boy is brought forward by Andrew. Could the boy's meagre but generous offering of five barley loaves and two fish suffice? Andrew would soon find out that it was more than sufficient. Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down'. John comments that there was plenty of grass in that place (v. 10). The Greek is informative here too. The Greek word '*chortos*' translated as 'grass' means a feeding place or fodder.

And then John describes Jesus performing an action that is very similar to the Last Supper, except the bread isn't broken. The people were reclining on the hillside – another connection to the Last Supper where the same word is used to describe the disciples at that table. John is asking us to learn from this sign

and from Jesus' teaching which follows on from it; to learn the true significance of the Eucharist and what God is giving us as we receive the bread.

On the hillside Jesus takes and receives the offering of food from the boy; Jesus gives thanks, lifting up the boy's offering to God, to the source of our being and the source from whom this gift originates. Jesus distributed the bread. All were fed, and there were twelve baskets with the uneaten pieces of the five barley loaves.

This event on the hillside opened the eyes of so many who had witnessed it. John reported that people were convinced that Jesus was the prophet they had waited so long for, a man like Moses perhaps. A prophet to lead them and help them rise up against the hated Roman occupiers.

Well, the witnesses got some of this right. They had witnessed the work of the Son of God, but they were wrong to assume this man would lead them in armed rebellion against the Romans. Jesus, knowing what they intended withdrew to a mountain by himself. He was not going to be party to any form of violent uprising or leader of a rabble of men with hate in their hearts. Jesus' message was of love, grace and mercy, and he fully understood the consequences of stooping down to the same level as the Romans.

Intriguingly, we don't get a further cameo of conversation between Jesus and Philip or Jesus and Andrew, to see if they now had learnt about God's abundant love and generosity. However, John provides us with the answer in another way.

The disciples go down to the sea and sail off in the dark of night, into a storm. In John's gospel, the Greek word he uses for down is '*kato*'; a word that describes the human condition, the earthy, competitive, controlling, ego-centric world. When John uses the word 'up', as in Jesus withdrawing up the mountain, the Greek word is '*ano*'; a word that connotes love, compassion, people being genuine and accepting others, recognising their differences and being comfortable in sharing their vulnerabilities without fear of judgment or exploitation. '*Ano*' sounds to me, by that description, to be as close to the kingdom of God; where we recognise our ego, where we don't let it dictate our thoughts and behaviours and wish to be sufficiently free of it to be our true selves and to find our wholeness in our relationships with other people and in relationship with our Triune God.

Anyway, back to our disciples, down in the stormy sea. A group of men who were no doubt struggling with all that they had witnessed; all conventional wisdom and natural laws had been overthrown by what they had seen. They

were in their own sort of storm, battling between their own understanding of themselves and their known world and what they had seen. And then, to cap it all, they see Jesus walking on the storm-tossed waves. And they were afraid. The NIV translation has Jesus say, 'It is I; don't be afraid.' In the Greek it is much more powerful; 'I am. Do not be afraid.' At that, the disciples willed to receive Jesus into the boat. In the midst of their stormy confusion, the stormy sea, Jesus has come from above, '*ano*', down, '*kato*', to be with humankind and rescue them. When they were no longer afraid and trusted him, they immediately found the boat had reached the shore. Note that Jesus didn't step into the boat. At a physical level they had reached their destination of the western shore of the sea of Galilee, but more importantly spiritually they had heard the word of Jesus and believed. Their storm had ended, they had reached a new place in their heads and their hearts. They had heard and they believed.

And what about us? Have we had moments on a stormy boat and safely landed on the shore with Christ? And how we might have done that, surely with God's love, grace and mercy?

Our reading from Ephesians has something to say about the nature of God and our response to God.

The Ephesians reading can be neatly summarised as, '*I pray that you may comprehend how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and may know this love that surpasses knowledge.*'

We can thank Julian of Norwich for that remarkable summary, upon which her 'Divine Revelations of Love' are partly based. I refer to Julian of Norwich (1342–1416) because I do believe that one way to obtain a real sense of the comprehension of love is to be willing to spend time in silent contemplation with some of scriptural texts that guide us into a place of receptivity to God's message and love for us.

Julian's basic message was simple but radical: "I was taught that love was our Lord's meaning." Endless love, blessed love, unutterable love, and tender love, a love that has no beginning or end. In Ephesians 3:18, it is a love that is infinite in its dimensions of width, length, height, and depth. It is a divine love that surpasses human knowledge.

Julian said, "the greatest honour we can give almighty God is to live gladly because of the knowledge of his love." And in living gladly and in seeking to live 'above' or '*ano*', in God's kingdom, rather than 'below' or '*kato*' in a too ego-

centric world, we may be revelations of divine love to others, and bring them to faith.

May we all be able to step off our stormy boat and plant our feet firmly in God's kingdom and draw others to Christ through our reflecting of God's divine love, that surpasses human knowledge, filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

ⁱ 'Revelations of Divine Love', by Julian of Norwich, editor Barry Windeatt, OUP, 978-0199641185