



THOUGHTS FOR SUNDAY
TRINITY 8
2 AUGUST 2020

Feeding the five thousand

Matthew 14:13-21

Some people take the view that Jesus, during his earthly life, knew every step of the road he was to take right from the start, and never departed from it. Personally, I doubt that. It seems much more likely to me, and appears to be borne out by what we read in the gospel stories, that his life opened up in stages to him as he pursued his way. In today's gospel reading we are told that the news of John the Baptist's beheading causes him to withdraw to a deserted place by himself. Why? Perhaps because the fate of his cousin, who stated publicly that he was but the forerunner, reveals to Jesus, perhaps for the first time clearly, how difficult his own path is likely to become.

Anyway, any hope of a time of quiet contemplation is soon ruled out as the crowd chases after him. In another spontaneous action he has 'compassion for them' and cures their sick. This has consequences as, having seen healings, the crowd, not surprisingly, hang round to see what might happen next and Jesus, prompted by his disciples' plea (perhaps they feared that an unfed crowd might turn nasty), multiplies the five loaves and two fish that are to hand and feeds 5,000 men (to say nothing of the women and children – a familiar story!) with 12 baskets full of left-overs.

The primary lesson to be drawn from the miracle is its demonstration of the super-abundance of God's grace and provision, which overflows with generosity.

I want to return, however, to my initial observation about how Jesus sees his mission. I see this episode very much in the pattern of his understanding developing as he reacted to the circumstances he encountered. I find this particularly helpful as it reveals the full humanity of Jesus' nature, this being just the experience all of us have every day. In 'ordinary' times we can, perhaps, overlook it most of the time, caught up, as we are, in a regular routine of things to do, engagements to keep, until we are brought up sharp by the next personal crisis that comes our way, for which we have no direct personal experience to guide our response with certainty. Then we are forced to draw upon our reserves of experience, our personal resources, and the support friends and relations if we are lucky enough to have them, to try to chart our way through the circumstances with which we are confronted. Of course, we are not living through 'ordinary' times at the moment; the whole world is in this crisis position and is reacting to something the vast majority of us did not see coming, and trying to make the best of things, based on what we, collectively, know.

If we are disposed to think that our best interests will be served by making things as comfortable for ourselves as possible, that will dictate our actions one way. There will be no-one to care for the sick and no-one to comfort the bereaved. No-one will seek to relieve those made destitute, at home or abroad. The disease will, no doubt, eventually run its course, and the fittest individuals, the fittest societies will survive, and will have learned the lesson that the pursuit of naked self-interest is the route to success in this world, and will use that as the guiding principle for the next crisis that occurs.

If, on the other hand, we are disposed to think a better outcome from our current travails will be achieved by working together to overcome the virus, and by building a more robust society globally that is not primarily focused on getting a short-term advantage over someone else, then that will dictate our actions in a different way, and lead to the learning of different lessons for the future.

I have no doubt that Jesus was disposed to do his father's will, and that he allowed that principle to direct his thinking and actions in each circumstance that his life threw at him. Perhaps that is the surest way of securing the best possible outcome at the present time, and in the future?

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