

*Sermon reflections*

by Reverend Professor Canon  
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## The feeding of the five thousand



### Reflection Questions

1. Do you recognise in yourself the signs of being spiritually drained, when you are running on empty, not a full tank?
2. What are the legitimate pressures of family and friends, work and leisure, caring and serving that press upon and demand something of you at the moment?
3. What has God placed in your hands, blessed and broken, which enables you to be the blessing of God to those around you?

I love the energy of this story, the gift flowing from Jesus, through his disciples to the crowd. But the story actually starts with tired disciples. Fired up from their first mission, special agents of the Kingdom sent with Jesus' authority to preach, cast out demons, heal the sick (Mk 6:12-13) they now need time to rest, to debrief, to be with Jesus - and food!

Sound familiar? We need to remind ourselves, especially at the beginning of Lent that we need time to step back and space to stop *doing* and *talking* and start just *being* with Jesus. But there's a crowd coming, clamouring, noisy, needing more of what Jesus has to give. And they are in the way of a precious, much-needed moment.

As Jesus begins to teach Mark points to the motivating core of Jesus' entire being: "He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." Jesus didn't come just for his disciples but for all who hunger and thirst for a word from God.

But the disciples still need rest; send them away to buy food. Doubtless the crowd *were* hungry but it's the disciples who say that, not the crowd themselves. Sometimes we're better at telling people how they ought to feel than at listening to find out their real needs.

Then comes Jesus' challenge: "You give them something to eat" (v.37). You've just seen what happens when God's Kingdom is present - now it's your turn. This is the challenge of Jesus' compassion: learn to see the world through Jesus' eyes, and face the challenge: what are *you* going to do about it?

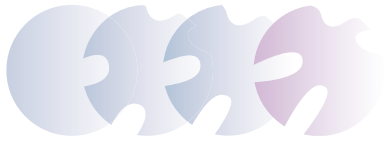
The disciples don't get it and in monetary terms, it's daft. 200 denarii was about 8 months' wages for a day labourer. But Jesus' answer is much simpler. "How many loaves have you?" (v.38). Start with your own resources, bring them to me, and see what I can do with them. And in Jesus' hands an impromptu picnic becomes a foretaste of the feasting of the Kingdom of heaven.

Jesus *takes*, *blesses*, *breaks* and *gives* the bread (v.41); four simple actions that came to define the Eucharist. *Taking*: accepting the small, inadequate (grudging? doubting?) offering, saying Yes, I can use this. *Blessing*: lifting it up to God to be consecrated, holy, something God can use. *Breaking*: bread can't be used unless it is broken. *Giving*: using the disciples' hands to distribute God's gift. It's not for you to keep; it's for you to pass on to others.

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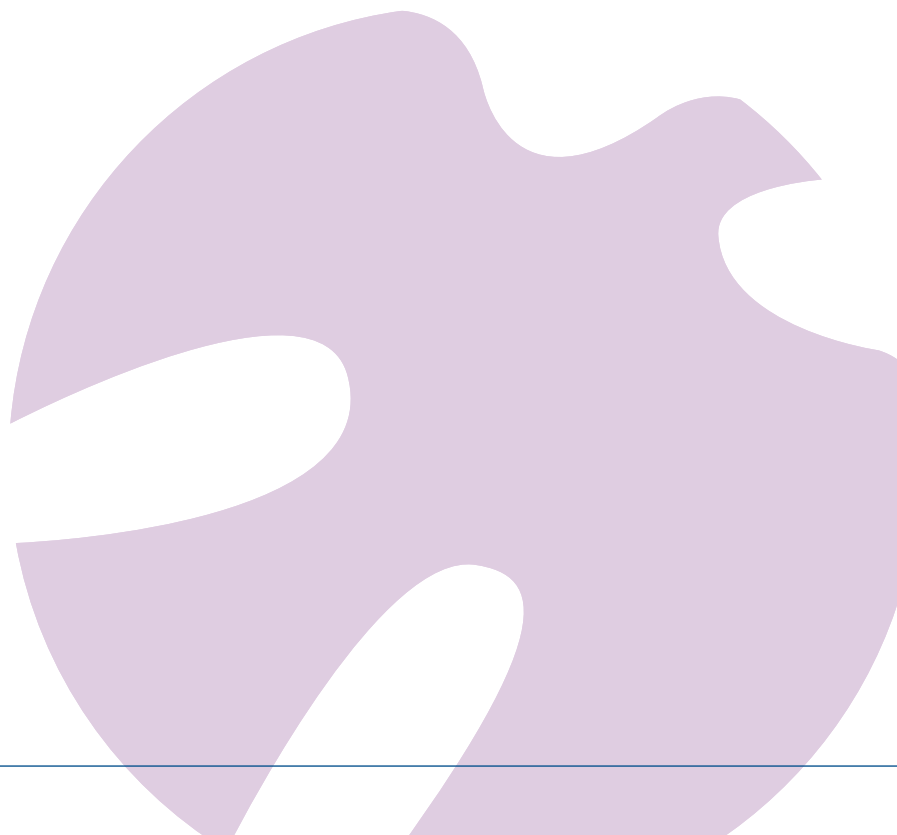
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## The feeding of the five thousand



That's the discipleship challenge and the challenge of stewardship: are we ready to act as channels for God's gifts? Do we keep God's blessings for ourselves, or share them with others? We can't be closed in on ourselves. We need to offer ourselves - with our needs and our totally inadequate resources - to Jesus, to be accepted, blessed, consecrated in God's service, broken, and given for the life of the world.

It's a risk; we need those precious times apart to let God build us up; without him, our resources really are inadequate. We can't be givers unless we are also receivers. But Jesus' giving is always over the top - gallons of wine, basket-loads of bread! (v.43). When Jesus gives, there's plenty enough and to spare. ■



## The widow's mite



### Reflection Questions

1. Jesus notices the widow's generous gift. Have you ever been struck by a generous act that has made you sit up and think?
2. "Grabbing or giving": in a consumer society what pressures make it hard to practice generosity?
3. In what practical ways can we, like St Paul, learn to be content?

**A**s so often with Jesus' teaching, this saying seems to fly in the face of common sense. Life was hard for widows in Jesus' world - especially if they had young children to support. Without a trustworthy male protector to look after their interests, widows were vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. (Jesus makes this point in the saying about the scribes who 'devour widows' houses'.) So why would it be a good thing for a widow to throw into the Temple treasury her pitiful 'mite' - the two copper coins that were all the money she had?

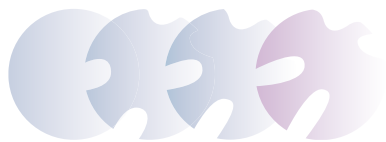
Among the first Christians, the support of widows was one of the primary charitable concerns of the church (cf. Acts 6:1, 9:39). But again there was a practicality about this concern: families were enjoined to provide for their own dependants before donating money to the church (1 Timothy 5: 3-8). So again we ask: why? Why does Jesus praise this reckless (some might say foolish) generosity?

Jesus is not advocating a practical aid policy here but using an everyday observation to make a much bigger point about a whole way of life. (And we note in passing that it is typical of Jesus that he even noticed this insignificant woman!) There's a recurrent theme in the Bible that the poor - those who have nothing - have a lot to teach us about generosity, and about how easily 'having stuff' means getting enslaved to it: our possessions generate anxieties, they begin to 'own' us. Those who learn to give (like St Francis) are those who have learned to escape from the tyranny of 'stuff'.

It's a choice between two lifestyles, two fundamental attitudes of mind - grasping or generous, grabbing or giving. For the 'scribes' (the religious elite, well-off and comfortable), giving to God is giving a carefully - calculated proportion of their property: it doesn't dent their real income, and it doesn't make any difference to their basic habits of mind.

What Jesus sees in the widow is just the opposite of this: giving her whole life, holding nothing back, trusting God implicitly to provide. It's the same attitude that he sees in the birds of the air and the lilies of the field (Matthew 6:25-33) - a passage that we find equally difficult. If we believe that everything we have comes from God, then giving isn't something we calculate - it's all his. We receive it (and enjoy it) as a gift: but when the time comes, we can let it go. In the words of St Paul, 'I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, to be content with that. I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things through him who strengthens me' (Philippians 4:11-13). ■

## The way of the cross



### Reflection Questions

1. On your journey of faith what have been the 'cross-roads', those moments of decision or change or faith which have shaped your faith?
2. Looking forward, what discipleship challenges or changes might be ahead as you explore your vocation and walk in the way of the cross?
3. Dr Alexander writes of Jesus' "reckless generosity". What do we need to let go of, hold less tightly if we are live the life of God's kingdom?

Every time I have to fill in a medical insurance form, I marvel at the macabre calculus of compensation: so much for an eye, so much for a toe. But how can you compensate that kind of loss? How can you work out what a limb is worth - or a life? Or even more, an immortal soul? What should you give - what *could* you give - in exchange for your soul?

I find it helpful to imagine Jesus' conversation at Caesarea Philippi beneath the towering cliffs of Banyas, where the head waters of the Jordan gush out of the rocky cliffs dotted with shrines dedicated to gods and emperors: a place where humanity and divinity seem to come very close. This is where Jesus takes his disciples aside to ask them the \$64,000 dollar question: Who do you think I am? - and to hear Peter's staggering reply: You are the Christ, the Messiah. You are the one God has chosen to inaugurate his kingdom on earth. It's a moment of insight that looks *back* at all that Peter and his friends have witnessed in their time with Jesus: deaf people hearing again, blind people seeing, hungry people fed: signs of God's kingly rule actually happening here and now.

But the next moment, Jesus twists them around, gently but remorselessly, to look *forward* to the fate that awaits the agent of God's kingdom. No celebrity culture here, no popular acclaim, but the death of a criminal, rejected by the leaders of his own people. What kind of a king is this?

That can't be right! Peter protests - only to have Jesus rebuke him too. Because that is the way the Son of Man has to go, the only way to bring in God's kingdom: not with trumpets and drums, not with bombs and guns, but with the reckless generosity of the One who has everything - and gives it all up for love.

No wonder Peter finds it hard to grasp! But there's worse to come. From now on, Jesus is gently but persistently teaching one of the hardest truths about being a disciple - the truth that discipleship means *following*, following Jesus on the costly path of self-giving love, the path that leads to the cross. The only way to save your life - the only way to outwit death - is to lose it: to be prepared to give up everything, even life itself, to follow the One "who loved me, and gave himself for me." Try to hold on to it, try to keep something back for yourself, and you'll lose it. But place it in his hands, hazard everything for the sake of Jesus and the Kingdom - and you'll find it. That's the deal - nothing more, nothing less. ■

## The great commandment



### Reflection Questions

1. 'Hear O Israel'. In our noisy world how do you personally make space and time for Shema – listening to the word of God in your life?
2. Is there one bible verse or story that for you captures the heart of what it means to you to follow Jesus, to live a kingdom life?
3. In what ways does your love for God express itself in care for other people?

**W**hen Jesus rode down the steep track from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday (Mark 11:1-11), he was committing himself to the public life of the city.

To enter Jerusalem as King meant (among other things) to engage with the passionate, questing debates of its scribes and sages. If the Kingdom of God means anything, it has to mean something here: where people struggle to find God's wisdom in the confusing and contested politics of the city's streets.

The argument about which is the greatest of the commandments had been running a long time. Was it one of the 613 commandments that the lawyers counted in the Torah? Was it one of the Ten Commandments? It makes sense to read these as summary headings for all the others, summing up my 'duty to God' and my 'duty to my neighbour' - but which is the most important? Is there a single commandment that sums up everything else?

What Jesus quotes in answer is not one of the Ten Commandments but an even more famous verse from Deuteronomy 6:4-5: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength.' This was the *Shema* ('Hear O Israel!'), which every Jewish child was taught to say morning and evening, a personal and all-pervading testimony to Israel's foundational faith in the one God. So the first commandment, the one that sums up all the others, is not about 'duty' but about a reorientation of our whole being: it's a command first to 'hear' - to pay attention to who God is - and then to 'love'. If you make that love the foundation of all that you are - mind and heart, soul and body - then everything else will follow.

But what does that love mean in practice? Jesus spells it out by quoting the other 'love' commandment from Leviticus 19:18: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' Loving God can't be divorced from loving the world God made and the people we share it with: it isn't a private personal devotion that shuts us off from the needs of our neighbour. Thomas Merton, the American monk who dedicated himself to a life of contemplative prayer, observed that the more we open ourselves to God, the more we open ourselves to our neighbour: they aren't opposites, they're two sides of the same coin. (As a Romanian monk once observed to me, you can tell a good monk from the villagers who beat a path to his door.) Conversely (as St John observes in that great meditation on the love of God, the First Epistle of John) having a heart closed to our neighbour's needs calls into question our claim to be loving God (1 John 2:9-11; 3:16-18; cf. James 2:14-17).

And finally: note how Jesus' conversation with the lawyer brings his questioner closer to the kingdom of God (v.34). Even the way we conduct our arguments can reflect God's love. ■