

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole
The Nineth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, August 2, 2020

Isaiah 55:1-5
Psalm 145
Romans 9:1-5
Matthew 14:13-21

“Little drops of water,
Little grains of sand,
Make the mighty ocean
And the pleasant land.

So the little moments,
Humble though they be,
Make the mighty ages
Of Eternity.

So the little errors
Lead the soul away
From the paths of virtue
Far in sin to stray.
Little deeds of kindness,
Little words of love,
Help to make earth happy
Like the Heaven above.”

These simple, and perhaps rather sentimental, words by 19th Century, American poet, Julia Abigail Fletcher Carney, challenge us to focus on the detail of human action and existence, and to raise these small simple things up as the building blocks of the greatest of things.

If you are a Utube enthusiast you may have noticed a new genre of videos that simply involve watching people build things. It can be quite compelling and satisfying to watch. There is an Asian version where one or two men, each with a

single long tool dig into the ground and craft elegant underground caverns with water features and beautifully appointed arches and the like. The thing that is so compelling, is that they achieve this just chipping away little by little and using nothing more than the single tool and their bare hands. These projects must take many days of back breaking work. We only see the highlights, but we are encouraged, because we see what a man or a couple of men can do if they chip away long enough and with enough skill. Maybe, we subconsciously think, I could make something like that, and possibly deal with some of the big problems in my life and the world like that.

When I was first ordained, 34 years ago now, I was a young fresh-faced Curate in a group of six parishes in six small towns in a place called Fife, in Scotland. I had special responsibility for one of the small outlying Churches called St Serfs, Burntisland. It was a lovely church, and about 20 people, all but two of us, women would gather there for the service each Sunday. Now, in my youthful enthusiasm, I believed, as I think most of us do when we are young, that we can change the world and revive the Church purely by our own sheer determination and hard work. So it was that I looked up all the people who had been married, or had a baby baptized at the church, or who were in their 20s or 30's and still on the Church's role. I persuaded a very dubious, but lovely couple (the only young couple who came to church in fact!), to host a gathering at their home. I then proceeded to go round and knock on all the doors of the people on my list, perhaps fifty names, and told them I was trying to get a group of people from St Serfs together to meet and plan to raise some money for charity. The day came and not one person came! I felt very sorry for the young couple who had prepared some hospitality for the guests, and not a little for myself. I apologized and said to them, "Well we tried." To my surprise the couple told me that they knew no one would come. Apparently, in places like Burntisland, no one will ever go to someone's house they don't know. "If you had had in the Church Hall they would have come." So we did that, and to my amazement some 20 people turned up, we formed a group, organized a fund raising event and many of them started coming to church. This has always been a powerful lesson to me. It is almost as God was saying, you try to do this alone and you will fail. Only once you have failed utterly, as I did there, will God step in and make something wonderful happen. The key thing is he won't do that if you don't put the work in and fail first. I have tried that approach too. Sitting back and expecting God to do it all will get you nowhere.

In this morning's Gospel we see this experience human inadequacy and Divine help shining out of the Gospel narrative.

When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me."

Time and again in our lives I believe this pattern is repeated. Jesus shows us a problem and tells us to fix it. We try and realize we don't have enough of what it takes to do it. Jesus tells us to bring it here. He blesses what little we have and what we have failed so far with to do anything with and, lo and behold, something wonderful happens. It happens because God takes our poor offering of ourselves and makes it the means by which other people's hearts are changed. The lovely young couple were won over by my hard-won failure much more than by my enthusiastic over confidence.

The story of the feeding of the 5000 has three traditional interpretations.

First, there is the possibility that Jesus miraculously multiplies the loaves and the fish into great quantities. Enough for 5000 with 12 baskets over. Now, do I believe that Jesus could have done that, just as he turned the water into wine, healed the sick and raised the dead? Well yes, I do believe that, because if God exists and Jesus is indeed his son, then it is completely reasonable to believe that the creator of the universe could do such a small thing.

Secondly, some see in this story an early version of the Eucharist. Once blessed the bread and fish are shared and everyone takes the tiniest morsel just as we do at the communion rail week by week. By the way, don't you just miss the Eucharist so badly? I know I do and I hope and pray we will be able to have communion again come September. Is this a possible reading? Yes, I think so. Certainly, we recognize that we are spiritually rather than physically fed in our hearts and minds and lives, in the Eucharist and it could be that this is what is happening here. A miracle of a different kind where all are fed in a way they had never been before.

Lastly, some have seen in this story an equally miraculous event, but one which is a miracle of the human heart opened up by God. People had food; they were just

afraid to share it in case they did not have enough for themselves. Jesus shows them the way and. Lo and behold, 12 baskets full were left over after everyone had had enough. Is this version possible. Absolutely! Indeed, it has, for me at least, the strongest appeal, because it is never in doubt what God can do, but it is always our biggest doubt that we human beings can do anything of great importance.

As we look around us today and survey the brokenness of our society, its civil unrest, a pandemic, that seems to refuse to lie down and, no doubt, so our own problems in relationships, in lack of health or wealth, or in our inability to be who we sense God would have us be. In all this we may well see ourselves in the disciple's shoes once again in the Gospel today.

We hear Jesus say to us, "You give them something to eat, you fix it" and we regard the enormity of the problems that confront us as we say, "We have tried and failed. We do not have what it takes." Jesus then says, "Bring it over here." If we do that, if we really have tried all we can and failed in his name, then he will surely bless and wonderful things can happen.

My little example I described has meant a great deal to me down the years but the same Gospel event has happened a thousand times in a thousand more important ways. Fr John's friend Chris, was a beautiful example in last week's sermon. A man who lost everything to illness but who found a new beginning through God's blessing. Another might be the RC priest, Fr Horace McKenna in SE Washington who started feeding homeless people out of his kitchen window 50 years ago. Today some 70 teams of people provide 1200 meals every single day of the year.

"Little drops of water,
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Today, I suspect many of us feel at a loss as to how to fix the many, large and manifest problems of our society and day. We watch our TV screens and think, "what are these among so many", "what am I against such vast malevolent forces." Well, I think Jesus says to us all, "bring what you have over here and I will make it enough."

This is no promise to do it all for us, but rather a promise that, if we are prepared to give our all and, if necessary, to fail in his name, he will take our small sacrifices, efforts and failures and build his kingdom out of them.