

9TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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Photograph by Carolyn Wheeler

**READ:
MATTHEW
14:13-21**

"We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish."

REFLECT:

This week's Gospel reading is the story of one of Jesus' most well-known miracles. Perhaps also one of his most important ones, given that it's the only miracle account that makes an appearance in all four gospels.

It's beautiful story of hospitality, community, sharing and abundance. But I think it has a grittier message too. A message about how the enormity of the need we see around us can be overwhelming, paralyzing, so much so that our instinct is to put it out of our sight ("send the crowds away..."). How in the face of so much suffering and injustice in the world it can seem like our resources to respond amount to nothing.

This week I took part in some "zoom" meetings with a group of other newly ordained URC ministers. We were prompted to reflect on our ministry so far, and on how we and our churches have responded to the strange times we find ourselves in. It was a reminder to me that my ordination was supposedly to a "mission" role. How the plans that had begun to take shape were thwarted by the pandemic and lock-down. How my focus had shifted to pastoral concerns.

Disappointment, feelings of failure, and paralyzing uncertainty in the face of so much need were recurring themes in our small-group conversations. But I came away feeling a bit lifted. By peer support but also by lessons that are reflected in our Gospel story. That pastoral care IS mission. That Jesus' concern is for the gathered people, and not just their spiritual needs but their physical ones too; their sickness, their hunger. Jesus demonstrates the importance of self-care; dealing with his own grief after learning of the death of John the Baptist he takes himself away to a deserted place to find some peace. But when the crowds follow him there, even with his own inner resources depleted by loss he is moved by compassion to action.

This story contains a challenge, a call to action, for us. Notice that Jesus doesn't feed the crowd directly, he instructs his disciples to do it. Their response: "we have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." I wonder what our response is? "I have nothing but 8-10 hours a week." "But there are so few of us." "We're all getting on in years." These statements may be true. But let's try not to underestimate God's ability to do astonishing, wonderful things, even (or especially?) with the little we feel we have to offer.

Tiny mustard seeds that grow like weeds. A small amount of yeast that works its way through a big batch of dough. A child's packed lunch that feeds a vast multitude. Small, ordinary, hidden or overlooked, counted as nothing... these are the materials Jesus chooses time and again, and it's how this Kingdom of God thing seems to work.

PRAY:

- For all who are hungry.
- For all who are feeding the hungry - food bank staff, community kitchens, neighbourhood volunteers.
- For all who are sick, and those who care for them.
- For compassion that leads to action.
- For faith that God does and will resource us to meet the needs of others, with abundance that exceeds our expectations.

RESOURCES:

Our friends at Wheatley URC have a huge archive of online sermons you can listen to, and are regularly posting new resources on their website:

www.wheatleyurc.org.uk

