

Chapel of St Peter and St Paul, ORNC

11.00am Choral Eucharist

Ninth Sunday after Trinity [28 July 2024]

readings: 2 Kings 4. 42-end; Ephesians 3. 14-end; John 6. 1-21

When I was a boy growing up in Boston, it was always a great treat when my parents would occasionally order in pizza for our dinner on a Friday night. This was especially exciting to me and my younger sister, but with three older, teenaged siblings, there never seemed to be quite enough of this delicacy to go around. In the cutthroat world that is mealtime in a big family, this was probably inevitable. It was in response to this reality that my sister and I developed an unspoken competition between us. Now, I couldn't say just how or when it started, but both of us began to watch carefully each other's progress in eating our quota of pizza and then to gauge our own consumption accordingly. The object was to have more left over after the other person had already finished his or hers. I'm not really sure why this was a desirable outcome, other than it meant one of us then had to watch as the other ostentatiously consumed the last few bites of cheese or pepperoni or mushroom left on the plate. In one sense, then, it was a fairly straightforward case of sibling rivalry, which, needless to say, in those days was never in short supply. But in a larger sense, this childhood recollection has always bothered me, illustrating as it does something perverse and abiding in the logic of human nature. For however innocently, my sister and I were both, even as perfectly well-fed and well cared-for children, instinctively interested in deriving satisfaction from another person's sense of want and the envy that grew out of it. There was in fact absolutely no reason for either of us to worry whether or not we would have enough to eat. And so it's clear that something else was driving this primitive impulse: a sense that some other kind of ill-defined fulfilment could only to be had at the other's expense.

And while I feel sure none of *you* was ever so calculating or ruthless in your own childhood, this story nonetheless seems to me to raise more general questions about how we as human beings are inclined to see the world. Do we see it as a world of abundance, or do we see it as a world of scarcity? Are we capable of being satisfied with who we are and what we have in ourselves, or is all our desire and our sense of value defined in relative terms to what other people are and what other people have? When another person has more or simply has or is something else, does what I have or what I am necessarily become insufficient? If we're inclined to see the world in terms of scarcity, then yes, life becomes a zero-sum game in which there must be winners and there must be losers, insiders and outsiders. But if we see the world in terms of abundance, then such distinctions largely become meaningless. For when we actually believe that God has created a world that is generous and abundant, then we're free – free to live in such a world more generously and more abundantly.

Clearly it is God's desire for generosity and abundance that's the recurring theme running through all our scripture readings today. So, in the Second Book of Kings, Elisha instructs his servant to place bread and grain before an assembly of a hundred men, and despite all common sense, this proves to be enough. This episode is then echoed by the more familiar account we've just heard from the Gospel of John, in which Jesus instructs his disciples to hand out the contents of a little boy's lunchbox – five loaves and two fishes – which against all reasonable expectation, proves adequate to feed a crowd of 5,000. Yet what's striking about these passages is not just the miraculous claim that a small amount of food can feed such large numbers, but even after this, we're told both times that there is still food left over. So Elisha promises of the men that are gathered, that 'they shall eat and have some left' (4.43), while Jesus similarly insists that his disciples should gather up all the leftovers, thereby demonstrating that there's always been more than enough food to go around. In each case, we're therefore invited to imagine what the world must look like when God is in charge: it's a world in which there is always enough – more than enough – precisely because God's world is not a culture of scarcity, but rather a culture of plenty.

What these stories also serve to remind us of is that what we believe about God is capable of shaping our own reality as well. To embrace their meaning, then, is not just a question of

arbitrarily accepting something that's impossible, but instead recognising how God can transform our most fundamental ideas about the nature of bounty and of want. So in his Letter to the Ephesians, St Paul prays that the church in Ephesus may 'know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God', because this is the same God, Paul says, 'who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think' (3.19-20). Once again, God is the source of abundance, the One who provides not just enough food or shelter, but also enough love to fill our hearts, enough joy to give us hope, enough power to accomplish things that we have so convinced ourselves are impossible, that we've stopped even bothering to ask for them. This, it seems to me, is the essence of all the stories about miraculous feeding: they challenge us to enter into a world in which these miracles are just the tip of the iceberg, a mere hint and foretaste of what God can do for those who truly live in him.

The readiness of Elisha and Jesus and Paul to welcome and embrace God's abundance in the world – this is a readiness that we in the Church today don't always find it so easy to emulate. Like a great many before us, too often we approach the world with an attitude of scarcity rather than one of abundance. We want to protect what we have, to minimise risk, to know what we know, and to fight our own corner. It makes us uncomfortable when other people – even other Christians – do things differently, or whose way of thinking and doing isn't immediately comprehensible to us. But to engage with the world in this way is, after all, un-faithful: unfaithful to a God who gives us what we need, and who works out his purposes with a variety that will always baffle our plans, even as it reveals a breathtaking sense of plenty in the world. And so it seems to me that we do have a choice – a choice as to whether we will be a stumbling-block to new possibilities or whether we will seek actively to embrace and to celebrate them. And we can only really celebrate such abundance properly if we're prepared to stop worrying about what's on somebody else's plate. Only then are we free to join our voices with that of the psalmist when he sings his praises to God: 'Thou openest thine hand: and fillest all things living with plenteousness' (145.16).