

Some time ago, on a visit to Tees-side, Barbara and I went into a BHS store for a cup of coffee (do you remember those days,- when BHS was British Home Stores, before lattes, cafés noisettes replaced milky coffee?). As we sat down, an elderly woman left her cup of tea on the next table and came across to ours. 'Excuse me, sir, but you look like a sensible man. I'm looking for help. My husband died recently and I keep hearing very depressing reports about the collapse of the banks and I wonder if I should be worried, or doing anything to safeguard my savings'.

We talked for a few minutes, then the woman thanked us and returned to her own table, presumably feeling better for having shared her thoughts. The point to remember here is that Barbara and I set off to do some shopping but, out of the blue, were asked by a complete stranger for financial advice. While we responded to the request, we have no idea what happened in the woman's life after that morning.

Incidents like this are part of the daily lives of all of us. But in reading through today's passage from John, I found myself wondering how the boy with the loaves and fishes felt when he was singled out from the five thousand to help Jesus to feed them. He certainly gave Jesus the food he'd brought with him but I wonder what he felt like by the end of the day, having seen so many people fed, with still enough food left to fill 12 baskets.

The feeding of the five thousand reveals a great deal about Jesus and his mission. First there is his **compassion**. He saw the hunger of the people who had been with him for a long time. He felt for these people who were physically and **spiritually** hungry. It would have been easy to say, 'There are too many of them ; we cannot hope to feed them'. But Jesus's heart goes out to them and he wants to help them.

Then, there is the **challenge** Jesus presents. He asks Philip, 'Where can we buy bread ?' It must have been quite a daunting question when Philip saw the size of the crowd. He guessed it would take many months wages to buy enough bread, and where could they buy it from anyway ?

Of course, Jesus was challenging Philip and the disciples to look at their own resources and potential. Though our own resources are small, they can be completely transformed when placed in God's hands. Andrew seems to rise to the occasion when he says, 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and a couple of fish. But how far are they going to go, among so many ?' How often do we wonder how much difference our seemingly inadequate resources can make ?

We read of the clear **command** of Jesus : 'Make the people sit down'. The disciples were asked to get the people ready for a meal, and then, after the prayer, to distribute the food. Jesus does not work alone ; he works through us and with us. Without him, we cannot do any great works. Without us, Jesus will not work ; he wants us to be prepared to willingly share with him. What an amazing privilege that all-powerful God should **want** us to help him!

And, of course, there is his **concern** . He says, 'Gather up the fragments that are left, so that nothing is wasted'. Can you imagine the reaction of the disciples ? Jesus, who could feed five thousand with a few loaves and fish, was now worrying about scraps and crumbs ! But does

not want any waste ; he is concerned at how we use the things around us and how we deal with the world of which we are stewards .

But Jesus is also **cautious**. The people were excited. Some saw this production of a meal as a 'sign', and said, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world'. They wanted to take Jesus and make him their king. But Jesus did not come for this kind of kingship or to be a puppet of the people. Here, the people were after him for what they could get out of him. Jesus once more withdraws to the mountain by himself to talk with his Father.

At this point in history, we have the benefit of the gospels and the witness of saints over the centuries to enable us to understand more about the significance of events such as the feeding of the five thousand. Such a context was not available to the crowds at the time of Christ's earthly ministry. They had to interpret these happenings in the light of their experience of God's providence up to that time.

Providence? The word 'providence' is derived from 'pro-video', and the dictionary definition talks of 'foresight', and 'timely care'. God created the world of space and time, and he is above it, within it, and throughout it; not confined, as we are, to only one moment at a time. He can see ahead to what is going to happen to us in the future.

He is the universal provider, whose foresight and loving care ensure that his children always have what they need- though not necessarily what they want. But belief in Jesus is belief in **love**, not in **immunity**. God does not spoil us by giving us all we ask for, but if we believe in him we are often amazed at how often he gives us **far more** than we deserve.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul encourages them to trust in God's love for them. He writes, ['I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God'](#).

So we must always be alert, to see God's hand at work in the beauty of the world around us, and in the things that happen to us. And we must allow ourselves to be filled with the same character as God's; a benevolence and love for all, and a sincere wish to help people cope with life, ready to step in to help if they fall down, to pick them up, comfort them and point them in the right direction.

Only God knows how he manages to make things work out as he has planned, often in spite of our lack of co-operation or understanding. But, if we pray, he **will** fill us with all his fullness.. We can know **something** of that love which is beyond our comprehension, and we may then become a blessing to others.

Have you ever wondered about the boy who gave up his bread and fish to the disciples? How did the disciples **know** that he had the food? Who had spotted him-in a crowd of five thousand? Did no-one else think to bring along something to eat? Well, maybe they **did**, but the message we can take from John's Gospel is that, in trying to ensure everyone had what they needed, Jesus used one seemingly insignificant young lad to serve the needs of thousands.

The young boy came to the gathering equipped to spend time with Jesus. He had simply chosen to follow him, with the rest of the crowd, as he had heard about him and wanted to meet and listen to him. How could he have known that two thousand years later, the world

would still be talking about how his **snack** was instrumental in satisfying the needs of so many?

In the same way, as we go about our daily life, neither you nor I know at what time God will single us out to serve the needs of his creation. We may never know the consequences of our reaction. What's important is that we must be ready to respond to his call. The boy with the loaves and fishes doubtless felt he was only responding to a simple request to share his food with others. He could not have foreseen what Jesus could do with his gift.

When Jesus speaks to us, directly or through others, may we, too, recognise his voice and be ready to give him whatever he needs from us, to help forward God's work here in the Vendée.