

Feeding the five thousand by seeing what a child sees – Homily for Trinity VIII

2 Kings 4.42–44

Ephesians 3.14–21

John 6.1–21

Yesterday, we interviewed candidates for the role of our new Children and Family Worker. It was a day of anticipation as children, families, candidates and panellists shared a vision of the vital importance of children, not just to the life of our parish but our faith. As the day progressed this vision shone brighter, refreshing our hearts and minds with delight that is truly childlike.

It can be tempting to think this is something we must leave behind if we are to grow into full adult maturity. Surely, the paradigm of human existence is the self-sufficient adult who has liberated themselves from childish dependencies. And isn't God the ultimate self-sufficient individual? What is startling about Jesus is that, unique amongst the founders of the great religions and in contrast to so many philosophies ancient, modern and postmodern, he places such value on children and being childlike.

Jesus' words to this effect are scattered throughout the Gospels. For instance, he says, 'truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 18:3). These sayings put us on notice about how we should relate to children

in the church. To take these sayings seriously, challenges and transforms our understanding of ourselves and God.

Our Gospel today, with its account of Jesus feeding the five thousand, paints a striking picture in this regard. It shows how in Jesus, we encounter a God who makes his saving power rely on a child, rely on receiving a gift from a child.

This can be easy to miss, not least because children are easy to miss. It is easy to not see children in a large crowd. Even in John's gospel, the five thousand refers only to men. Children get left behind in grown-up conversations and decisions. Especially when there are urgent questions like those in today's Gospel: How are we going to feed so many people? Where will we get the money from? But when we fail to see children, we also fail to see what a child sees. And children often see more than adults. Think of the story of the Emperor's New Clothes. It took a child to state the obvious – the Emperor was naked. No adult dared contradict him.

I wonder, did you notice the boy in the Gospel today? I like to imagine he approached Jesus in this same brazen way. Here are some hungry people. I have food. Why not share it with them?

Jesus is the one who sees the child in the crowd. He is the one who values what a child sees. And we have to be like a child to see Jesus' Kingdom. To see Jesus. And what do we see in Jesus? He is full of child-like wonder, most of all in his relationship with the Father. This is no

isolated God, but a God of relationship overflowing with loving wonder.

The miracle of feeding of the five thousands is not just about bread. It is also about Jesus sharing his child-like wonder; his vision of God's kingdom in the midst of us. A kingdom in which all things are gifts of God's love – the breadth and length and height and depth, as Ephesians says (Eph. 3:18). And these gifts are to be shared by all with all for all. Gifts of love that even death and suffering cannot diminish. And this is a cause of great thanksgiving!

But how does Jesus share this kingdom of abundance and thanksgiving with the crowd in the Gospel? When Jesus sees the boy with bread and fish, he does something unexpected. He makes the crowd sit on the grass. Now everyone is the same height as a child, everyone enters into a child's perspective. Something new plays in the hearts of those present. Life overflows in the intimacy of playful encounter between neighbours. And Jesus gives thanks for this moment. For all that the Father has given. He shares this relationship to the Father with everyone. Like bread, but so much more than bread, this relationship satisfies all hunger. This is the coming of God's kingdom where everyone is a child of the Father, just as Jesus is.

Of course, we remain adults, with responsibilities, required to make difficult decisions, shaped by life's experiences, needing to pay attention to detail, think abstractly, act justly, choose good over evil.

But, as God's children, able to celebrate the wonder of children, our adult eyes are refreshed and transformed. We see into the abundance of God's generosity that surrounds us. And God makes his own saving creativity dependent on the gifts we receive and share with each other in fearless childlike wonder. This is how we enter the kingdom of heaven. This is what lies at the heart of the Eucharist as we receive Christ in bread and wine, and share his abundant love with others.

The crowd in the story miss this part of the miracle. They fail to see what the child sees. They fixate on Jesus as the answer to their problems. They want to seize him. Force him to be king. But Jesus evades them. He's not that sort of king, not that sort of God. He doesn't rely on mob rule, popularity contests, or any kind of force, especially the force that misuses the language of faith to dominate.

Instead, Jesus goes up the mountain. He returns to the Father. And calls us to the Father. Calls us to follow him into the life of God by sharing all good things as God's gifts with wonder and thanks. And in this way to share yet another wonderful gift – God's Holy Spirit, who plays in our hearts, making us bold to call God our Father and empowering us to live the fullness of our humanity even amid scarcity and need.

The Gospel finishes with another striking image. Despite all that I've said, it remains tempting for us to be like the disciples who, though they had witnessed God's abundant generosity transforming human

need, still feel they should use their self-sufficient adult strength to overcome life's strong winds and rough waters. Yet for all their effort, they are terrified, as only adults are when they encounter a mystery beyond their control, when Jesus appears in their midst. The disciples are lost at sea until Jesus says, "It is I, Do not be afraid." (John 6:20). He restores them to God's abundance. And as they reach out in childlike openness, suddenly they arrive at the shore of a land, a world, more full of mystery, wonder and abundance than they thought possible. Just as yesterday, our candidates reminded us of the richness of the land we are going towards as a church with both children and adults at the helm. About this land, the prophet Isaiah says it best (Is. 11:6; 9):

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them...

They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.