

SERMON FOR THE 8TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (Cape Town - 26 July 2009)

Text: ¹ Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias) ² and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick. ³ Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. ⁴ The Jewish Passover Feast was near. ⁵ When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" ⁶ He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. ⁷ Philip answered him, "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" ⁸ Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, ⁹ "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" ¹⁰ Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them. ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. ¹² When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." ¹³ So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten. ¹⁴ After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." ¹⁵ Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself. (John 6:1-15)

If you watched the news this past week you will have been struck by the many "lack of service delivery strikes". In fact these strikes have been going for longer than a week. We experienced one of these strikes during our holidays. On our way to our game farm, I was asked by my brother to stop at the butcher in Piet Retief to collect some meat for the family. About 5Km from the town we were warned to turn around. We couldn't enter, they said. So we made a huge detour and approached the town from the other side. We managed to get in, weaving our way past quite a few burning tires. But the butcher was closed, most probably fearing that his shop would be looted, and we left without any meat.

These strikes are disturbing, to say the least. But there is a flip side to these strikes. Fact is many people are suffering in our country. When it was so cold and raining, I was thinking of them - also our domestic help who lives in a house which is leaking terribly. Indeed some of these people live in awkward conditions and don't even have the basic necessities of life. When I reflect on it, my own good life humbles me. I tell myself, there is no reason for me ever to complain. In the light of the suffering and hardship that others need to bear, my life is a dream come true.

What strikes me in our sermon text, is the *compassion* that Jesus has for these poor people. God is not indifferent to the suffering of people. His hearts bleeds for them. Also for you when you are suffering.

The people that followed Jesus to the other side of the sea of Galilee, were the ordinary, peasant society of ancient Israel. Many were sick. The common factor

amongst them was, they all lived on the bread line or just below it. Sensing Jesus' compassion and experiencing some healing they just swamped him. In fact, Jesus had gone to the other side of the sea to get some rest. But they followed him there. And when he saw this large crowd arriving, knowing they had nothing to eat and no means to purchase anything either, his heart was again filled with compassion.

It is this compassion that prompted him to do something - then, as it prompts him to do something today. Striking is the way that Jesus reaches out to these people. I suppose he could have just performed a great miracle, all on his own. Something like the mana, the bread, the Israelites had received in the desert. One morning when they woke up it was just there.

But Jesus doesn't do it. Maybe because he knew, he wouldn't be on this world all the time. He engages his disciples. He asks Philip: **"Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?"** Philip is stunned. He doesn't know. He just knows that all the money they have or would get in the next eight months, would not suffice to feed these people. It would just be a drop in the ocean. Andrew, the brother of Peter, points to a little boy who has five *small* barley loaves and two *small* fish. But immediately adds: What is this amongst so many people?

Barley bread and fish were the stable diet in those days, like the maize meal many poor people live on today. In fact in those days you had two kinds of breads: Bread made from barley, which was cheap and less nutritious. And bread made from wheat, which the richer people enjoyed. The little boy only has "barley" bread.

But this where the miracle occurs. The miracle is not primarily that on that day a crowd of far more than 5000 people were fed. The miracle is what happens when a little boy makes the little that he has available to God.

Thinking about ourselves: Faced with what seems to be insurmountable problem in life or our society, we often shy back for two reasons. First, we think: Who are we to do something? Maybe you are not a successful business person and you think by yourself: Raymond Ackerman, the owner of Pick n Pay, he could do something. But that is hardly ever the way God works. When God reaches out to others in compassion, he more often than not uses the "little" people in life. Look at his disciples: Fisherman and tax collectors - poor people, or if they are not poor they have no esteem in society. Those are the people he uses. He uses the small once, those you would overlook.

The second reason why we often shy back from helping others is that we think, our contribution is too small. Or sometimes we think our gifts, or our talents, are too insignificant to make a difference. But here in this story, Jesus uses "barley" bread to

feed the masses. What makes a difference is not “what” you give, but “that” you give.

Important is that I come with who I am and what I have too God and say: “Here God, can you please use it to feed the masses”. Say to God: “I would like to be an instrument of mercy in your hands”. In the kingdom of God a small mustard seed, grows into a large tree. In the kingdom of God 5000 plus people can be fed with 5 loaves of barley bread and 2 fish.

God doesn't work on his own. He uses his disciples. That is the miracle. And that is the privilege and the honour he bestows on us. The apostle Paul marveled about this. Time and time again he praised God for using him in his kingdom, despite the fact that he was - in his own words - the greatest off all sinners, one who persecuted the Church of Christ. Being active in God's Kingdom is the greatest privilege bestowed on the human being.

Despite the involvement of the disciples, it remains clear in this story, *who* the real provider is. When Jesus receives the barley loaves and the fish, what does he do? He looks up the heavens and gives thanks. And in this story he is also the one that distributes the bread. That is something that we shouldn't forget: God is the provider. Everything I have comes from him. David writes about it in Psalm 145: ***“The eyes of all look to you and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing”*** (v.15-16).

Think a moment about the things that you have and can enjoy in this world, and then reflect: “These things were given to me by God”. Realisation of this frees us from greed and fills our heart with gratitude. As we give to others, God can make it grow.

In fact, when everybody had eaten and everybody was satisfied, Jesus called on his disciples to gather the pieces that were left over. They gathered twelve baskets full. There were twelve tribes in Israel. The twelve baskets indicate: God cannot only feed 5000 plus people. He can feed them all. What he gives has not limit.

But also in this story, there is an unexpected twist. Near the end of the story things go wrong. The story is derailed. When the people are all satisfied, they want to turn the promised prophet of God into some kind of a bread king. They want more and more and more bread.

Isn't that extraordinary? The moment God provides us with what we need in live, we want more. We are not satisfied with what we have. And worse is: Our focus is on “bread” all the time. As our material possessions grow, our focus become more and more material and less divine.

We saw it in East Germany when the wall came down. When it was up, the churches were packed. In huge masses people were praying for “bread”. When the wall came down and the “bread” was provided, God was forgotten. Likewise we so often pray for material help and when we get it, we forget the one who provided.

So when the people became “bread focused”, what did Jesus do? He withdrew again to a mountain by himself. All miracles in the Bible are but “signs”. They point to something else, which is more important than the miracle. Yes, Jesus provided the people with bread, but he came into this world to give them and us more - *more* than bread. When Jesus himself was tempted by the devil in the desert to become more bread-focused in his ministry, he responded: ***“Man does not live on bread alone, but every word that comes from the mouth of God”*** (Mt.4:4).

The multiplication of the bread by Jesus had one major purpose: to point to the one who is the bread of life. Yes, Jesus feeds the needy and uses us. But what he really wants to give is “himself”. Bread is needed to sustain life on earth. But it can only go so far, and then you die. In fact, it gives life only for the moment, tomorrow you are hungry again.

More important than the bread, is the one who is the bread, the one who forgives sin, the one who reconciles us with God, the one who gives us *eternal* life. If you have lost him, you know where you can find him. He is on the mountain. In the Bible the mountain is always a symbol, for the place where God is. And God is there where you hear his word and enjoy his fellowship. That is where he sustains you for eternal life. And that is what is really important. Amen.

Dieter Reinstorf