



Gifts to share

Reverend Judith Wigglesworth

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

6 August 2017

Isaiah 55:1-5

Romans 9:1-5

Matthew 14:13-21

God of all, may my words and our thoughts reflect your vitality and your promise. Amen.

Each of today's readings contains a promise from God. In a nutshell, what might God be saying to us in each one?

First, the reading from Isaiah. Straight away it's an invitation. "Come for water all who are thirsty". "Listen to me and you will fare well". And it's also a challenge. "You in turn will summon nations you do not know".

In other words God says: I have water of life for you. Come closer, drink and listen, and you will have life. Share that life with others – that's your job. We're in this together, and you will be glorious!

Second, the reading from Romans. Paul writes to the early Christians in Rome. His heart grieves for the Israelites, his kinsfolk. He wants everyone to recognise the gift of Jesus, and is willing to be an outcast himself if it meant that everyone accepted the gift of Jesus Christ.

In other words God says: No-one is outcast. I sent a Saviour for all of you, in the most unlikely way. Blessed are we, co-creators of this world!

Third, our Gospel reading: Jesus tells his disciples to feed the crowds. Small offerings are blessed and shared; and all are fed.

In other words God says: I trust you to feed others. You can do it. Share what you have, so none of my beloved people go hungry.

So, promises of water, food, life, and a job to do - to make sure others have water, food and life.

Today is an important day – a day when you will gather for your parish consultation to share your hopes, your dreams, and your contributions to this faith community so you thrive and flourish in the years ahead.

I don't need to remind you it's a time of change. It's nearly one year since we left St Alban's building. It's five months since Ellie was elected to be Assistant Bishop. And both of those issues have combined like a perfect storm to make the recent months perhaps some of the most difficult this faith community has had to deal with for a long time. The challenges for the parish leadership to make wise decisions in this time have been huge. And understandably many of you have loads of questions. What's happening? Where's everything up to? Can't we move faster? There are doubts, fears, frustrations, and maybe a temptation to say "This is too hard – I'm over it". Maybe some are not worshipping here with us today because they've said just that.

I refer to all those feelings, so we name them and admit them. Naming them shares them. Naming them creates space to address them. And most of all, naming them releases energy. I encourage you to use that energy in a creative way today; use it to look forward with hope and confidence. If you want to see the church grow, then ask yourself: What can I do? It's not the leaders of the church who grow the church; it's God – with the help of each and every church member. To echo the sentiments of Winston Churchill – *"ask not what the kingdom of God can do for you, but what you can do for the kingdom"*.

We have some wonderful images to draw upon from our sacred scriptures and one of the most powerful is that of the wilderness journey. At times the Israelites grumbled and complained – and just wanted to go back to Egypt. When the going got tough, they grieved what they'd left behind. They felt broken and lost. The end seemed nowhere in sight. But what did keep them going was God's faithfulness and God's provision. That journey was such a challenge, but it was also held such promise.

And for us now, those readings today are brimming with God's promises. Of all the days to hear three readings overflowing with God's goodness, today's the day.

Recently Bishop Justin shared some words at our leaders' ministry conference on "How to change". The fact we are in the midst of change is a given. It's non-negotiable. Five years in to his episcopacy, it's happening and it's real. There is no going back to Egypt. So collectively, on a diocesan level, we're the people of God in this diocese, caught up in this journey. As a parish, we're also caught up in another layer of change, with our buildings issues. And individually, we're in different places in the midst of it all. For some it might feel like an aimless, direction-less wandering in the desert, without some familiar and much-loved symbols. For others, new possibilities are in sight – you can see fresh opportunities and blessings already. Each person is in their own space in the journey - and that's ok.

But what's not ok, is that we get so caught up in the "I", and what "I" want, that we lose sight of the "we". We lose sight of God's promptings, and we lose sight of the "other" – including those not even on the journey yet – those who weren't even in Egypt with us.

Bishop Justin spoke about four opportunities for change, and I'd like to refer to two of them that this parish is right in the midst of.

Invest in a few to reach the many

Growing the kingdom of God and making disciples is what our faith is all about. Several years ago, the leadership of this parish decided that one of the best ways of doing this was through the vehicle of 3dm. Some of you may be puzzled about what exactly 3dm is – it is hard to explain – it's one of those things that you "get" by being part of it. But it has to start small and it has to grow slowly. It starts by investing in a few, and spreads like ripples from a stone in a pond. And it's working – people in the 3dm huddles are finding that their faith is being deepened, and as a result their desire to actively serve God and the church is growing.

Treasures of the old and treasures of the new

This change is one that has been thrust upon the parish - the impetus came from outside in the form of an engineer's report. It has forced us to find new places and new ways of being community. And that has been really hard. This parish is right in the midst of that tension between old and new. God knows that. God knows how hard that is. We'll only live well in that tension if we invite God in, listen to God's wisdom, and make prayer a priority at every

level of our parish life. Clarity will come, about which treasures we are called to leave behind, to make space for new treasures to pick up.

On Thursday in our Eucharist, the Gospel reading was the passage about treasures old and new (*Matthew 13:47-53*). In the midst of one of the new treasures we've discovered in the past year - the new treasure of gathering in people's homes - we talked about the readings, one from Exodus about the wilderness journey, and the "treasures" reading from Matthew. One of the phrases offered on Thursday was "the gift of not knowing". The people in the wilderness didn't know what was going to unfold, they didn't know exactly where they were going. And that meant that they were forced to be fully present where they were, and to trust.

The same is true for us. On this day when you have your consultation, you are called to be fully present where this parish is at, right now, and assess what's needed now to shape its future, trusting God and trusting each other. You can't "know" the future, but you do get to co-create with God the unfolding of the "what next".

I'm sure you'll all agree that you want to see St Alban's grow and thrive, have all ages represented in our faith community, and be a strong presence of the kingdom of God in Eastbourne and the bays. You might have different views about how to get there, and you will have different gifts that you can bring to the table. Today is all about perceiving a common purpose, looking ahead together, finding community in diversity, and offering yourself into the mix.

Which brings us back to today's gospel.

Picture the huge crowd on the grass, and those small offerings of loaves and fishes. Picture the people in the crowd sharing what they have, digging deep into their pockets to offer what they can, however small. Picture Jesus lifting all those offerings to God. Picture God saying Alleluia!

Now imagine God taking *your* precious gifts of time, energy, and creativity today, generously given, however small, gathering them together, and knitting them into something beautiful and unique for this place in this time.

What bread, what gift, can you bring to the table to share?

Grace and peace be with you.