

The Feeding of the 5000 (Reading Matthew 14:13-21)

When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick.

As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."

Jesus replied, "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."

"We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered.

"Bring them here to me," he said. And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Sermon

A solitary place

The famous bible story of the feeding of the 5000 shows us an unknown side of Jesus. We normally know Jesus as someone who reaches out to people, preaches to the crowds and travels from town to town always surrounded by his followers. But in this story he withdraws privately to a solitary place. Jesus had just learnt of the beheading of his friend and tutor John the Baptist and needed to get away from it all to mourn.

Bereavement can be devastating and makes us feel vulnerable. When life is challenging talking and sharing our feelings can help, but sometimes we also need some time to ourselves to come to terms with what's happened and give space to our feelings. It allows us to reconnect with ourselves, to hear our heart beating and feel the depth of our emotions.

Perhaps you came to the Swiss Church today for this reason: to find sanctuary, to find a place of serenity in the heart of the city that never sleeps. Here is a space to find quiet and peace. Here is a space to reconnect with ourselves and with God's Holy Spirit within us.

Yet when Jesus went to find solitude he was not alone for long. Huge crowds had followed him from the towns and were waiting for him on the shore of the lake. It must be a very exhausting life always being followed by the crowds. A bit like a modern day popstar! The disciples of Jesus were also affected by the many people that followed their master. They were exhausted and wanted to send the crowds away.

Ask, and you will be given

Yet this was not an option for Jesus. In Matthew 7:7 in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you."

To ask for help is a big step for most people. We tend to struggle along by ourselves trying not to be a nuisance and to help ourselves first. But there comes a point in everyone's life when we have to ask for help. Our wounds need healing and our hungry bodies and souls need feeding. We can't handle things alone anymore. To ask for help is a big step because there is always a risk of being rejected. The door might not be opened which makes us feel even more vulnerable than before. If we ask for help we need help now; not tomorrow, not next week, but now. That's why Jesus never sends people away who ask for help. It is one of the core principles of the kingdom of heaven.

It is also what it says here in our church: "Je ne metterai pas dehors celui qui vient a moi." - "Whoever comes to me I will never drive away." (John 6:37) We can't always fulfil this goal. We are often like the disciples who send people away when it's inconvenient, or when we need our peace and quiet.

There is enough for everyone

The story of the feeding of the 5000 is both a miracle story and also a story with deeper meaning. Our rational minds try to find logical reasons how five loafs of bread and two fish can feed 5000 people. Or even more! The biblical story only mentions the number of men and leaves out the women and children, so the crowd was probably much bigger. Miracle stories are

challenging. We either believe in them or not. There is no logical explanation. Miracles can only be understood with faith. The miracles of the Bible also reveal a deeper meaning beyond the question of rational truth.

What could the deeper meaning of the feeding of the 5000 be? There are probably as many answers as there are Christians. What I find most striking is the message that there is enough food for everyone. This is true on a much greater scale. There is enough food, enough water, enough comfort, enough love for everyone in this world. We just fail to equally share these goods. Often we shut the door when someone comes and asks for help. Often we decide to wait until tomorrow and send the people away. We are like the disciples, sometimes too tired to respond to the needs of others. The Son of God however never shuts the door. Even in his weakest hour of mourning he makes sure that the food is equally shared and that our needs are answered. This is the beginning of the kingdom of God, the beginning of equal sharing of all of God's blessings.

There are many ways to share in our daily life. Give a hug to someone who we know is lonely. Give money to charity. Bake a cake for an old friend or do the shopping for someone housebound. One way of sharing I really like are the baskets that can be found after the till in most supermarkets where you can leave food for people in need who live in your borough. It's a great way of spreading the enormous amounts of goods in our supermarket shelves more fairly. This could be a habit to get used to this Lent: to buy an extra tin of food for the basket and thus share with the people you don't know in your neighbourhood.

In this Lenten season let us share more. More food, more water, more love, more compassion, more of everything that this wonderful world has to offer.

Amen