Harvest Area Council Service

Holy Trinity Dunfermline 021011

Isaiah 55: 1-5 & Matthew 14: 13-21

Some things remain in the mind – I remember an elderly lady telling me about what it was like to raise a family during the 1920’s. It was down in the little streets near the station – if people didn’t work on the railway, they worked in the foundry. She told me how the children moved freely from one house to another. It was all right because nobody had anything very much. And she said that there was ‘Always enough soup in the pot’ for whoever was there.

Like the Welsh mining communities which have become unused to mining accidents, our generation has grown fat – literally – and unused to economic hardship. All pain is immediately anaesthetised. All pangs of hunger immediately dealt with. All needs immediately met. Not as simple as that of course – but part of us feels that that is how it should be.

Yet the story of our life with God is one which swings – between barrenness and fertility; between years of famine and years of plenty; between the temptation to turn stones into bread and the spurning of the devil; between stubbornly ‘toiled all night and caught nothing’ nets and nets filled with a great draft of fish. And in today’s Gospel between the modest offering of five loaves and two fish and a great feast with twelve baskets left over.

As I reflect on those biblical patterns, it seems to me that they tell us that it is hard to be spiritually alive when one lives only with plenty. It’s not that poverty or need are somehow in themselves wonderful or to be welcomed – for often they are miserable and degrading. But the movement from one to the other has the potential to quicken our souls. And that’s why fasting has always been part of the discipline of faith – practised in mild form as ‘giving something up for Lent’

And maybe that’s what brings Harvest Thanksgiving to life – if we understand need we may also know how to express thanksgiving. It’s easy to lose that in the supermarket. It’s easy to lose it even on the combine harvester - one of my friends staying with us last weekend hitched a lift on the combine harvester as it was passing and repassing our garden. And so he learned how the technology measures the yield in each part of the field and plots a map showing where extra fertiliser is needed in particular parts of the field to bring the yield up again next year.

But to learn not to take for granted the richness of harvest is to awaken a sense of thanksgiving for what we receive

And what might we learn from the miracle of the loaves and the fish – the miracle of grace in which little becomes much when they are shared in the context of a prayer of thanksgiving.

I remember many years ago when – believe it or not – I was in charge of youth development work throughout the Church of Ireland that I spent a weekend with a group of young people in the scattered and small parishes of Donegal in north-west Ireland. We talked about faith and its meaning – but it became clear that they saw part of that faith commitment as being about assuming responsibility for the church in their generation. The word they used was ‘burden’ We need to be faithful and prudent stewards – but we also need to learn to live thankfully with loaves and fishes generosity. When we approach our Christian living in that spirit, somehow the limitations do not apply – love which is shared grows exponentially – goodwill and generosity are infectious – welcome engenders warmth – invitation encourages response – sharing of faith fosters commitment. At the heart of the commitments which we made as a diocese is the aspiration that we should be attractive communities – and communities like that are attractive.