Forfar 030814

Mt 14: 13-21

I’m delighted to have the opportunity of being with you in this period before Andy and Norma move into their retirement. That gives me the opportunity of wishing Andy and Norma many years of happy retirement – a new phase of life, new possibilities and indeed new possibilities in ministry.

You won’t be surprised to hear me say that Andy’s ministry here has been greatly respected and admired in the diocese. He has done all the things that people expect of clergy – pastoral care, kindness and compassion; making contacts in the wider community; trying to build inter-church contacts. But he has also led the congregation in the direction of mission and growth. Under his leadership you have been among the first to use the Mission Action Planning process. Others worried about whether this was a good thing to do – you went ahead and shaped it in a way that worked for St John’s. The result is that you will expect in the future the kind of clergy leadership which is orientated towards the future of the congregation and its future growth. A time of change brings anxiety – but the best way forward for this and every congregation is to find leadership which does as Andy has done – does pastoral care, love and compassion; orders worship well; cares for the buildings and the business life of the congregation – but also looks beyond that to the future.

The gospel reading today offers us a pattern for the life of the Christian community and for its ministry which is very important. Jesus and the disciples are faced with 5000 hungry people and almost no food to give them. He takes the bread, gives thanks and breaks it – and they share it and share it and share it. That story belongs in what we sometimes call the miracles of grace. The Casting the Net/miraculous catch of fish is another of them. It is about the way in which by God’s grace ministry, faith and service grow as they are shared.

That becomes a pattern for us – for the life of the church. Resources are always slender. There will never be enough. The future will always look uncertain. The needs and the challenges will always look limitless. So we are called to miracles of grace – that we set out prayerfully and faithfully to do God’s will, to minister to his people, to gather people in – and the miracle is that there will aways be enough grace and love to go round. Indeed there will be more than enough.

Now you are probably wondering what I am going to do about replacing Andy – if such a thing could be possible. Yes of course we’ll set out on the process for the appointment of a Rector – it’s described in the Canons of the Scottish Episcopal Church. The Dean and I will come and work on that process with the Vestry. And the decision is made in this way – the Vestry makes a Presentation of a candidate to the Bishop for appointment and the Bishop decides whether or not to accept the presentation. In other language, the Vestry is the nominating body and the Bishop is the Appointing body.

But of course it’s more than just a process. In fact this moment is like any moment of change – it brings some heart-searching and reflection about the present and future life of the congregation here at St John’s. It is often about what I call the narrative of the congregation. The narrative of the Feeding of the Five Thousand – like the Casting the Net – is a narrative of growth. And you in this congregation have a narrative of growth. You have seen under Andy’s leadership how it is possible for a congregation to turn outwards and connect with the community; you have seen how it is possible to run events in the church – the kind of events which lead people to come in through the door and ask about the life of the congregation – you understand the challenge of becoming the kind of congregation which people might wish to join. Those things are part of a narrative of growth.

But it is all to easy – particularly at this moment – for us to find ourselves in a narrative of decline. We’re growing older and there are fewer of us. There will never be enough money. The building is a problem – how will be deal with a big maintenance challenge. That’s a narrative of decline and as it is shared everything grows smaller, hope shrivels and dies, people wander off because there is nothing which tugs at the heart and warms the soul.

The process of appointing a Rector is a challenge for any congregation. Once a person is appointed you can’t unappoint them – so great care is needed. But it is ultimately a process of vocational discernment – of attempting to understand what God is doing in this situation. I am fond of saying that the discernment is about knowing when the vocation of the congregation and the vocation of the priest are aligned – is this person the right person for this congregation at this moment. It’s not easy. It’s a matter for prayer as well as cool thinking.

So I hope you will pray earnestly about this as we enter the process of appointment.