Sermon: Annscroft 2nd August 2020 Trinity 8

Readings: Romans 9: 1-5 Matthew 14: 13-21

First just a brief word about the reading from St. Paul’s letter to the Romans. Paul was, as you know, a Jew and one of his deep concerns was why his fellow Jews did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. He is so passionately concerned about this that he says he would be willing to be accursed - to go to hell - for the sake of his fellow Jews if only they could come to know Jesus. And even though he was Apostle to the Gentiles, he did try as hard as he could to convince Jews, preaching in synagogues, arguing with them and finally being sent to Rome for trial because of the accusations of his fellow Jews. He was passionately concerned. And so was Jesus in the Gospel story.

I don’t know if you have had the experience of it being a beautiful sunny day. You haven’t had a very good night - and you settle down to relax, perhaps with a book or simply to lie in the sun. Then the door bell rings. You open the door and there is the whole family, children and all.. And much as you are fond of them you think, “O lord bang goes my bit of peace.”

Well, I imagine the disciples felt much more than that. After the news of the death of John, Jesus and the disciples must have been very upset, experiencing deep grief at the death of such a great prophet, some them having been disciples of John and knowing him intimately. So they retire to a quiet place to take in the news and perhaps think about the future. But then you can imagine the saying to one another,”Look, people coming. There’s more and more of them. Lord, we just wanted a bit of peace. We just can’t cope.”

But attitude of Jesus, grieving as he must have been at the death of his cousin, is different. He looks at the crowd and, filled with compassion, straight away gets to work healing and teaching and does this all the day long. By that time his disciples have had more than enough “Send them away to the neighbouring villages to get some food.” But No. Jesus’ compassion continues - “You give them something to eat.” Consternation on the part of the disciples - How? And so they experience one of the greatest of miracles, the feeding of the five thousand plus women and children. A miracle hard for us to believe and many theologians have tried to find rational explanations but I do believe it. After all, the resurrection shows God has power over matter -the empty tomb, the body of Jesus no longer there - and I believe we have much to explore about the relation between the physical, and spiritual.

But it was the thought of food and the compassion of Jesus that led me to the main point of this sermon. Hungry people is a major problem in the world and to our shame in our own country. The gap between rich and poor is becoming more and more talked about as being an absolute scandal. Just think - the world’s 2000 billionaires own more than half the world’s total population owns. Put it another way - the richest one per cent of people, mainly men, own forty four per cent of the world’s wealth. We do have some good examples of generosity - Bill Gates apparently not handing over his wealth to his children - only giving them 2 billion each. Warren Buffet whose goal is to give his entire fortune away by the time he dies. Richard Branson’s charitable foundation. But the situation is scandalous. But, hold hard for a moment. A few years ago, I tried to find out where I stood on the world economic scene and discovered, to my amazement that even though we did not own our own house, we were in the top ten per cent of the world’s richest people. Times have changed since then and many people’s incomes have risen especially in China, but still we are in the top 20% -at least 80% of the world’s population are worse off than most of us the majority living on a subsistence income.. And do we have compassion for the 3/4 of a billion people in abject poverty. Or, and this figure did shock me, for the 20% of the children in Shropshire who are living in poverty. And having compassion, do we have the passion to do something about it. But what can we do? Just looking at the figures is almost enough to send us into a depression. What can I do in the face of such huge problems. Well, I am going to suggest two or three things we can do. The first is obvious - look at our giving to charity that help the poor especially the food bank. But I have two provisos to that. Some people whose only income is the state pension and married people who do not have an income of their own, are very severely restricted in what they can give. If you are one of those, you should regard your giving like the widows mite in St. Luke’s Gospel. You can only give a bit but in God’s sight this is much more than a rich person who gives out of what he has to spare. The second thing - and we can all do this - is take an interest in at least two charities, one in this country and one world-wide that are trying to make a difference. Read about what they are doing, sign their petitions and pray for their projects - I must admit I am preaching to myself here as I don’t pray as much as I could for the charities I know are doing very good work. Thirdly. and forgive me if the PCC are already doing this, our church could support “The Churches action on poverty week” next year.

But, you may ask, what can my poor prayers do in the face of such huge problems? Jesus taught us all to pray “Your kingdom come” in the knowledge that such a prayer will, over the course of time, be effective. And praying for the hungry is, I believe a part of that prayer as Jesus showed when he fed the five thousand.