

*Trinity 11 2008 feeding of five thousand*

Jesus, upset by the appalling death of his cousin, John the Baptist, went off to be by himself. But being alone is hard when you are a celebrity. His fame had spread, and people flocked to be near him, bringing with them their sick relatives, desperate in hope of a cure. And though Jesus was probably tired, desperately wanting time for quiet reflection and prayer, he had compassion on them and performed many miracles. As evening approached, he finally had a chance to be alone, as his disciples wanted to send the crowds away. But Jesus does not take this opportunity, instead he asks that the crowd be fed, and so we come to one of the most famous stories in the gospels.

The feeding of the five thousand seems in some ways rather a strange miracle. After all, these people were not starving; they were not ill or in immediate danger. Why did Jesus want to do this? At first sight it seems like a trivial use for such power, for it is a display of enormous power, whether one takes the miracle at its face value or seeks a more rational explanation.

5000 people were sat down and fed. Actually, probably more like 10 000, because we are told there were 5 thousand *men*, besides women and children!

The power was used in the service of others, and the result was a building of community. These separate individuals that would have quickly dispersed tired, hungry, in a poor frame of mind, had shared food and, undoubtedly, conversation. Order had come out of chaos, community out of separateness. That's the real miracle.

And because so many of those that witnessed this miracle would not have been able to dissociate the concept of power from the concept of ruling in the model of Kings such as King David, Jesus had no choice but to demonstrate over and over again how power could and should be used in the service of others.

The lasting result of so many of Jesus' miracles was a restoration of relationship or community. Lepers, the blind, the deranged - all outcasts, and all brought back into community. And this is the final message of Jesus' ministry, that through him our relationship with God can be restored. We can be brought into community with Him.

Power, when used in the service of others, is creative, building up relationship, trust and community. Power when used for self gratification does the precise opposite, it destroys trust and breaks down relationship.

When we look at how power is exercised in the world today, the same polarities can be seen. It would seem, not perhaps surprisingly, that the prime concern of nearly all governments is to stay in power. And thus it is very rare for any government to introduce measures that benefit the least powerful, for by their very nature they may damage their election prospects.

If we look at the pharmaceutical industry, the sharing of information and the provision of cheap drugs for third world nations could transform health care in Africa. But what company would dare risk its profits or the chance of a competitor gaining economic advantage?

And then what of that group that seems to have increasing power in our society – the media? It can put individuals or institutions on pedestals with the apparent sole aim of delighting in their fall. Here is real power that can be used to expose evil, but equally can be used to destroy, to create mistrust and division.

There are countless examples of the selfish use of power by institutions and, sadly, the church is not exempt.

But institutions are made up of individuals, and reflect the society in which they find themselves. We will not get a government that serves all people, regardless of their influence, we will not get newspapers that seek to enlighten rather than titillate, and we will not get a church that is concerned with community, until we as individuals are prepared to serve and, as a result, to bear the cost of being misunderstood, thought naïve, or being regarded as troublemakers.

For serving carries with it a cost.

We, you and I, have power. Power to effect change. Power to build up community. We can choose what we buy, what we read, to whom we talk, whom we welcome.

But when you welcome in the outsiders, the people who have made a mess of their lives, when you try to mix the great and the rich with those far less fortunate, it is not always comfortable and certainly not always popular. When we choose to be servants we cannot expect to receive adulation or prominence.

But that is what we are called to be, and we have an opportunity today and at every Eucharist to experience that sense of being in a community that is created and served by Christ – if we are prepared to take the risk.

We can share in the bread and the wine that is his offering to us, and in so doing receive the power to serve, the power to be a community that reaches out in love to all.

Here we have, once more, the miracle of the loaves and fishes. We could, of course, take our wafer and sip of wine and go home unchanged as many of those who sat on the hillside did. But this bread and wine is offered not just for our immediate needs, but that we may participate in a community that is led by Christ. If we choose, we can receive a relationship that transforms not only our own lives, but the society in which we live. For it is a relationship that will teach us to serve without thought of reward, and to love without counting the cost.

This is the greatest power we can ever have and it is on offer to each and every one of us.

Thanks be to God.