**Sermon – Sunday 2nd August 2020 – Trinity 8**

**May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

One of the aspects of the pandemic response and the associated challenges that this has brought is the way that people have reacted.

If we think back to March – which seems as age away now – there was the initial panic as to what was going to happen when everything suddenly locked down and the norms of our society and shared life stopped, very abruptly.

Whilst some panic bought toilet rolls and tins of beans, others asked

“How can I help?” - “What can I do?”

We saw a multitude of responses, from Captain Sir Tom walking around his garden to raise money for NHS Charities, various local community groups springing up to meet local need from shopping to telephone contact, 750,000 people volunteering for the NHS to name but a few.

People volunteered to help for a number of reasons:

* To meet a need
* To offer something back
* To make productive use of their time if they had been furloughed or made redundant – “What did you do during the lockdown?”
* A personal connection to the cause that they helped with.

At the Food Project for example, we have had a number of new volunteers come along to help who were furloughed and some will continue to help long after the pandemic is over.

Each of us have probably volunteered at some point is our lives and as mentioned our reasons for doing so can cover many aspects of the human condition.

Normally when we volunteer it does not necessarily cost us anything – we offer spare time that we may have, we may receive expenses for travelling to the venue, we can gain a sense of well-being and satisfaction, a sense of self-worth.

It can be a different prospect when we are asked to volunteer to help with an event or for an organisation that will actually cost us something – maybe we have to take time off work to help or sacrifice the opportunity to work, we are expected to fund our own travel or equipment for example.

Similarly we can be faced with a situation whereby we have the opportunity to help someone or a situation but it would involve a sacrifice on our part.

Do we wish to get involved, to put ourselves out, to incur a cost in one way or another?

We can decide that actually we don’t want to help - we would rather focus on ourselves and our own well-being.

This sense of focusing on our own well-being and labouring to satisfy our own needs resonates in our reading today from Isaiah, when the prophet is challenging the people as to why they labour for that which does not satisfy or spend their money on that which is not bread?

There is a clear challenge to focus on what is from God, the word of life, that truly satisfies and which can lead to a fullness of life that is free from the pressures to conform.

Our Gospel today reminds us of the event that is remembered as the Feeding of the Five Thousand and is probably one of Jesus’ best known miracles and builds on this theme of freedom.

This miracle account appears in all 4 of the Gospels – Matthew 14 that we heard, Mark 6, Luke 9 and John 6 – and each one gives certain additional aspects of the event that Matthew omits.

The numerical number 5,000 is a bit misleading as we know that this was just the men – we can probably double or treble this number to arrive at a true figure.

What we do know is that there were a lot of people – a large crowd – and they were hungry.

The disciples response to their need was to send everyone away to go to the local villages and shops – I was reflecting what the locals would have thought if they had suddenly had an influx of people all wanting to buy food at such a late hour – and the cost that would be involved if they bought everyone their supper.

Chaos would probably have ensued.

Jesus response to the disciples’ suggestion was to put the onus on them to provide the food and I suspect that Jesus already knew what the response would be.

The disciples responded with the sum total of the food that they had – 5 loaves and two fishes – and at a human level there was no way that was going to feed such a crowd.

John’s account mentions the offering of the young boy who had 5 barley loaves and 2 fish and presumably had come forward to offer his food for the greater good – I doubt that the disciples would have commandeered it from him.

I wonder what was going through the young boy’s mind when he offered the bread and the fish –

* Was it his food to give or was he holding the family picnic hamper?
* Did he think his offer was going to be accepted?
* Did he think that he would now be hungry and his offering would result in virtually nothing for everyone?

We don’t actually know but I would like to think that he had been listening to Jesus’s teaching and that had transformed his way of thinking and resulted in his making this free-will offering for the common good.

He had grasped the fundamental truth that disciples of Jesus cannot just abandon those in need to their fate.

The Theologian and author Anna Case-Winters describes the response as follows:-

“Jesus manifests a freedom from self-concern that exposes our bondage to self-protection and the many forms of servitude to which self-regard holds us captive.”

“Freedom from self-concern”

This is a phrase that can encapsulate that which can hold us back from truly following our calling as disciples of Christ.

We are too often focused on our own needs and well-being that we allow this to dominate all that we do and every decision is shaped by the impact that it would have on our own life and well-being.

If I do what Jesus asks, will it cost me anything?

What will people think?

We are also reminded in this account of the feeding of the multitude in the wilderness with the manna from heaven and the feeding of this multitude is described in Eucharistic language – the language of the meal that we are all invited to share as we gather together.

As we heard, Jesus took the loaves and looked up to heaven, blessed them, broke them and gave them to the crowds.

Again, theologians point to the time when Jesus sacrificed his own Body on the cross.

One of the challenges of the pandemic has the disruption that it has caused to our custom of sharing food together.

We have had many months when we have not been able to break bread together and whilst through God’s grace we can make our own spiritual communion and receive the benefit of Christ’s body and blood whilst not physically receiving the sacrament, we know that sharing food is a vital part of our Christian witness.

We know that we are strengthened by the receipt of the sacrament and we also recognise that Eucharistic worship must lead to Eucharistic lives, lives that are free from self- concern.

Lives that are given to share and to serve our neighbour.

That our neighbour in need is not an inconvenient interruption but a gift.

We are called to distribute our life in service, to offer what we have to God so that it can be blessed, broken and shared out.

The young boy who was part of the crowd that day by the lake had grasped the message of Jesus and had responded with all that he had.

As we look to go out into our community, with the challenges that we are all facing now, what can we offer, what can we give to God so that others can be truly blessed and fed with the bread of life.

**Amen.**