

“Things can’t go back to how they were before Covid 19”. I’ve heard people say that a number of times. I expect you have to. As the impact of the crisis becomes clearer - highlighting the great divide between rich and poor, making us keenly aware of corruption and injustice, the potential for economic collapse and the extent to which we have polluted the planet – then the more urgent is the need to make radical changes to the way we manage our world. “Things can’t go back to how they were before”. But is radical change likely to happen? Is it not more likely that, as lockdown restrictions are eased, we will turn our backs to what has happened and scramble to reactivate the consumer culture? But the depth of the recession for us all – and particularly for the poor and marginalised – may force us to make radical changes to the way we manage our lives if human life is to flourish once more.

When we say that things can’t go back to how they were before we are drawing attention to the things that really matter – food on the table – bread for the world. And that can take us to the story about the feeding of the five thousand. There are a number of versions of this story spread across the four Gospels. Clearly the Gospel writers regarded the story as a miracle. Jesus blessed the food – but note that none of the accounts say that he multiplied the loaves – then, at the end, twelve baskets of broken pieces remained. We can’t get back to what actually happened but we can see how the Gospel writers ran with that recurrent theme in the Bible - God’s compassion for the poor and destitute. The feeding of the five thousand spells out the compassion of Jesus for the crowd – their basic need of sustenance. The Gospel writers would also be very much aware of that picture in the Hebrew Scriptures of the Great Banquet where God “will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines” (Isa. 25. 6). The Great Banquet is a powerful image of God’s love and describes our longing for God and all that satisfies. It is a vision of heaven described as a meal where **all** are **equally** invited to sit down together and receive God’s hospitality. It is clear to us – as it would be to those who first heard the story of the feeding of the five thousand – that the Great Banquet – this sacramental foretaste of heaven - is also a reference to the Last Supper and the regular pattern for Christian worship – the gathering round a table to receive Jesus as bread and wine.

Here, in this story, we see the earthy practical needs of hungry people merged with the hope for transformation, a sacramental foretaste of heaven. The Gospel writers are telling us that Jesus, the breaker of bread, is the fulfilment of the Law and the prophets. Jesus stands for the things that really matter – the bread that satisfies all our needs. He is bread for the world.

The earthly and the heavenly go together. Jesus meets the needs of the hungry and is himself the gateway to heaven. Satisfaction starts with meeting real needs and his action makes plain the compassion of God. The lack of faith on the part of the Jesus' little band of followers in the story blossoms into a state where all are satisfied.

We can see how this transformation from little to much is managed in a very practical way. It is a turning outward to meet practical need. It is about bread for the world – about compassion for those who are marginalised, poor and destitute. When we say that things can't go back to how they were before the virus, I believe that we are talking of nothing less than a radical change to the way we live. If the lockdown has made us sensitive to the needs of friends and neighbours then it has also made us glaringly aware of the massive disparity between rich and poor across the globe and the selfish disregard that has been generated by a system of governance that puts acquisitiveness above basic care for one another. If society is to change as a result of this crisis then it will require a costly willingness on all our parts to challenge our competitive 'me first' society.

These powerful images - the Great Banquet of fine food and drink - God's invitation to share his overflowing love - our yearning for bread that satisfies - our urge to share bread together – all this joyful anticipation of a new way of living is mixed with the painful realisation that so many in our world simply struggle to survive. The compassion of Jesus was achieved at great cost. So we cannot expect that a future restructuring of the economy that is willing to put bread for the world as a top priority could be anything but costly.

May God, the provider of the feast, free us to share his overflowing love.

So, to end, here's a prayer on this theme by Steven Shakespeare :

God of compassion,  
whose heart goes out  
to the hungry and destitute;  
who takes our lack  
and transforms it into much:  
give us the bread that satisfies,  
the food without price,  
that our lives may be freed  
to share your overflowing love;  
through Jesus Christ, the breaker of bread.  
Amen.