2 Kings 4: 42-end; Ephesians 3: 14-end; John 6: 1-21

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

An interesting set of related readings this morning. And my problem was where to start… So maybe at the beginning is as good a place as anywhere. We heard the Old Testament reading from 2 Kings in which the man from Baal-shalishah came to the man of God bearing the first fruits of his harvest: twenty loaves of barley and some fresh ears of grain. And Elisha directed him to give it to the people, but the servant was fretting over the fact that no way would twenty loaves feed a hundred people. But lo and behold, it feeds everyone and there is still some left over. And you thought the feeding of a lot of people with a little bit of food was exclusive to the gospels, didn’t you!

And then Ephesians 3, verse 14 to the end, speaks about the abundance; the length, breadth, depth and height of God’s love- that we need to recognise in order to be filled with all the fullness of God, who accomplishes abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine….

And finally the gospel story of the feeding of the five thousand in John, which is so well-known to us that we sometimes fail to see the detail. If we hadn’t been busy celebrating Mary Magdalene last week, we would have heard a bit of Mark’s gospel where Jesus talks about the people being like sheep without a shepherd, followed by a bit where Jesus and the disciples get mobbed by crowds wanting healing and so on, both of which sandwich (appropriately enough) Mark’s version of the feeding of the five thousand.

But the version of that story that we heard today comes from John and has a number of salient details which differ from the synoptic gospels version: Philip and Andrew both play a named part in John’s story, and the little boy only appears in John’s version of the story. So straightaway we have a much more personal, individual account than we get in the other gospels – a story with some flesh on its bones. We get personal encounter with Jesus, and it is particularly significant, I think, that it is this small boy who is bringing the gift that is going to make the difference.

It is not many weeks ago that we had the story of the mustard seed: it grows into something tree-sized, but more significantly, it is a pernicious weed that just grows and grows and grows. So that image is of the Kingdom of Heaven as a pernicious weed that will just grow and grow and grow – which thought releases us from any sense that we have anything to do with it doing that growing. We may discover the Kingdom, embrace it, live in it, but we are not responsible for either making it or building it.

That sense of God’s abundance is clearly in this story, just as it is present in all of the readings today. In the feeding of the five thousand – and in the Elisha story from 2 Kings – also in the surfeit of wine at the wedding at Cana in Galilee – we get a fabulous sense of the overwhelming nature of God’s goodness to us.

But then we move to the second part of this morning’s gospel – and there’s a storm, and Jesus sort of almost saunters past – we are told he is walking near the disciples’ boat, on the water. And he says to them: why are you worried? And unspoken there is the subtext: you know about God’s overwhelming abundance to you – I’ve just fed five thousand people; so why on earth are you worried about this storm? Faced with this enormous love, why do we get anxious if things are a bit stormy from time to time? In life’s rocky places, we just need to catch a glimpse, almost, of Jesus out of the corner of our eye, to remember that love and to begin to trust in its power.

There was a lady who took part in an imaginative reading of this story, who said that she had never noticed the little boy. Which is interesting. We can all have loaves and fishes available to be amplified by God…but we usually don’t because we think of every good reason why we should keep them to ourselves.

So if we think this through imaginatively, we begin to wonder what the little boy’s story is. There was far too much for him personally there, so presumably he was carrying this food for his family. His parents were likely going to be jolly cross that he had given this rabbi tonight’s meal in order for him to give it away to a load of other people. And in all sorts of ways, we are people who say: well I will be extravagant, I will be generous, but first I just need to make sure that I have enough in order to be able to afford to be generous.

In other words: conditional extravagance. So not really extravagance at all…….. Reminds me of the Ferrero Rocher advert – don’t eat them all…….. Or else we want to limit our generous giving only to those people we think ought to be beneficiaries of it. But the little boy gives. Is that because he’s a child? That he is able to just give, while we as adults want to secure ourselves first.

In this case, as in some other miracles of Jesus, someone has to offer something – to reach out - in order for it to be amplified by Jesus’ generosity. And there is a message in that: that we aren’t waiting on the Lord, or waiting for the Holy Spirit – in fact the Holy Spirit is waiting on us to offer what we have in order for this extravagance to be released. Luke 6 says: give and it will be given to you: a good measure pressed down and running over. The question is whether we can open ourselves to the generosity of God by being properly generous ourselves.

The American theologian Eugene Peterson, best-known for writing the contemporary language version of the Bible known as the Message, says: This is the gospel focus: you are the manor you are the woman. The gospel is never about somebody else; it’s always about you and me. The gospel is never a truth in general; it’s always a truth in specific. And that is why it will never be enough to say: This is what we have done with what we had – God should be very grateful – and now we can stop because we have played our part in his story……

Living by the bottom line – as every church treasurer knows - is essential: we need to know what’s in the budget, we need to recognize our current limits – but at the same time we mustn’t allow ourselves to be limited by them.  There is a deeper reality.  We don’t debate about how the multitude was fed.  Or how the multiplication of the loaves was achieved.  We don’t fret about how the boat seemed magically to reach the shore in the blink of an eye. Actually all we need to do is trust God, and then act on that trust.

And making that connection is everything.  There is enough food to go around if – as the small boy proved - we let go of our grip on our possessions, on whatever we see as Our Own.  Everyone can be sufficiently resourced if we willingly offer what we have and if we work at creating a means of delivery.

Jesus said, It is I; do not be afraid. Whatever we do that is truly in His name, will be blessed.

**Amen**