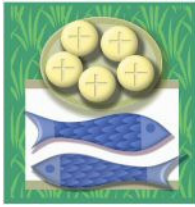


Fr Paul's Homily

26th July 2009 - Seventeenth Sunday of the Year (B)



*Jesus gave out as much as was wanted
to all who were sitting ready*

I was struck by how careful everyone was to gather up the scraps left over so as to fill 12 baskets. It reminded me of two bits of news I came across this week. I know that we cannot rely on statistics, nor should we believe everything we read in the papers, but these two things seemed significant.



The first was on the Andrew Marr programme. I discovered that in Europe and the United States together we waste a lot of food. That has to be wrong because it comes as gift from God. But it gets worse. The amount of food we waste would feed the starving people of the world at least 3 times more than they need.

The second was closer to home and was on the front page of the Hampshire Chronicle. Winchester remains among the worst polluters in the country with a high score of carbon emissions. Interestingly, the paper said, we have an unusually high number of "eco-evangelists". There is a willingness to change things but we are not being too effective in our own place.



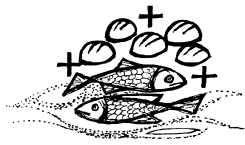
We want to be people who are guided by the principles of justice but we do not seem to know how best to do it. So where do we begin?



Let's go to the hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee where Jesus asked Philip, who lived in those parts, where they could buy some bread for the vast number of people to eat. Philip, like many others, must have thought they Jesus was out of his mind. A huge amount of money would only give each person a tiny fragment. Andrew responded to Philip's challenge and pointed out that there was a boy with two fish and five barley loaves. To cover his embarrassment Andrew said "What is that between so many?" Barley loaves, by the way were the food of the poor.

As Jesus contemplates the 5000 men to say nothing of women and children and the five barley loaves and two fish we see the answer to the question about the best way to use the gifts we are given to bring about justice, peace and sustainability. John tells us that this is Passover Time, the time of deliverance from slavery to freedom. In our case it is slavery to an age of convenience and to the pursuit of what we want despite its cost and the impact on others. As Jesus invites the people to recline we can expect a banquet with the Messiah as the host giving an answer to the fundamental questions about life and how to live it.





So back to the five barley loaves and two fish. They are, as Andrew points out, ridiculously meagre and of little use in feeding this vast multitude. But notice what Jesus does, and this has to be our starting point. He sees the barley loaves and the fish as sacred and is filled with respect for them. He does not dismiss them as Andrew did. They are gifts from his Father and he gives thanks for them before anything else happens. Then we see how in the distribution everyone has enough to eat, in fact more than enough to eat because there are 12 baskets left over.

The bread and fish were unremarkable like the bread and wine that we bring to the altar for the Eucharist, yet both become the presence of God's transforming power in Christ. In the celebration of Mass and in the miraculous feeding on that Galilean hillside we see the difference that Jesus makes. We see so clearly how the fruit of our weak and faltering efforts are transformed by the action of Christ's spirit into the life giving power of Christ himself.



So while we have so much that we can afford to waste food, over 852 million human beings – about 13% of the world's population - do not have enough to eat. Similarly the world looks on at the citizens of Winchester to see that they are among the worst polluters of the environment. Hard and uncomfortable facts!

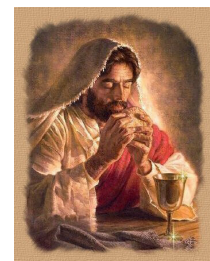
Where do we go from here?

Like Philip and Andrew we have to acknowledge that of ourselves we cannot overcome the difficulties and challenges that beset us as persons and as a race. This will be uncomfortable and unpopular because, as Pope Benedict XVI said in *Caritas in Veritate*, "Poverty is often produced by a rejection of God's love, by our basic and tragic tendency to close in on ourselves, thinking that we are self-sufficient or merely an insignificant and ephemeral fact, a 'stranger' in a random universe". It is vital that we are people imbued with a spirit of repentance which means that we acknowledge that we need God's love and power which comes to us in Christ.



That has to be our starting point and it opens us to the many gifts which God is constantly offering. And Jesus shows us the way. Before the feeding he gave thanks for the gifts he had. Gratitude and thanksgiving to God are vital if we are to be fully alive and make justice and peace something at the heart of our mission.

After he had acknowledged his need to God and given thanks Jesus gave the food to all those who were ready to receive it. He saw that the gifts were given to him to be shared with all those around him without exception. It would not have entered his head that some should be kept back for himself or his friends or that there might not be enough to go round. The same must be true for us. Everything we have, everything we are is gift from God. We give thanks and then we find the best way of using it for the advantage of all guided by the principles that are based on Jesus' command to love. In a world where self-sufficiency and private property are basic assumptions this is a difficult message but is what we believe. Pope Benedict says "It is not by isolation that we establish our worth but by placing ourselves in relation with others and with God". (*Caritas in Veritate*)



This solidarity or vision of persons in communion holds true for us as individual persons, as communities and nations and is indispensable if we are to be effective in feeding the hungry or reducing our carbon emissions.