

I recall early on in the days of my ministry attending a Diocesan clergy conference in Dublin. The speaker that year was a Rector from a Parish in New York. He told of how he had been appointed to a dwindling parish not far from Wall Street, the home of the American Stock Market. He had been given the job of nursing the Parish through the painful process of closure. Before embarking on that, conscious of the Church's proximity to Wall Street, he decided to explore possibilities of development of a weekday ministry to the people working in the offices in that part of New York.

So, one Sunday morning he shared his thoughts with members of his Parish and asked people to come forward with offers of gifts of service. At the end of the service one lady nervously approached him saying that she didn't think she could be of much use, but she did have a talent for producing tasty food cheaply. Initially they both laughed and then the Rector stopped. Here they were on the edge of Wall Street full of people working in offices who could be interested in lunches produced at an attractive price.

And that is what they started to do. They produced lunches at an attractive price and people started coming to the Parish Hall for lunch. Initially there was no preaching – the Church was simply offering a service. And then people started taking an interest in what the Church was doing. Up to then it had just been a closed-up building that they had walked past on their way to and from work. And from their questions a ministry started that grew and the church gained new life both during the week and at the weekend.

A small, apparently inconsequential gift, offered in faith in the service of the Church producing results, the re-energising of a Parish that was set for closure. I leave that thought with you as we go on to reflect on our Gospel reading for today. As Matthew puts together his Gospel, this account of the feeding of the five thousand is set in a wider context of teaching, of the stilling of the storm, of healing in which Jesus is presented to his readers as one having authority over sickness, over the powers of nature, one who teaches with authority. Today I just want to focus on this particular story of the feeding of the five thousand, and in particular the disciples' reaction to Jesus telling them to give the crowd something to eat.

<sup>15</sup>When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' <sup>16</sup>Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' <sup>17</sup>They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.'

*Matt 14:15-17*

We have nothing here.

We have nothing here ....but.

The mind set is fixed on the enormity of the problem and not on the resources to hand. Also, as you read and reread the story, the Gospel writers have not left us a story of Jesus producing food out of thin air. It is a story of Jesus taking the resources to hand and working in and through them to meet the needs of the crowd; 'and all eat and were filled'. This is not just food to fill a gap, this is a meal that satisfies.

As we look through the Bible, we see time and time again, stories of God taking the weak and insignificant and working in and through them. We hear

of an old man Abram and his wife Sarai, both too old to have children, being uprooted from their homeland and settled in a small insignificant place with a promise of children. A story unfolds of Patriarchs, of Judges and of Kings in all their strengths and weaknesses, their faithfulness, and their failure – God works in and through them.

In the Incarnation, we experience God coming to us in a child born in a stable, who comes not as a long anticipated military Messiah but one preaching a message of reconciliation, of turning the other cheek, going the second mile; reaching out to leper, to tax collector, to sinner, to those in deep emotional turmoil. One who dies a humiliating and seemingly pointless death; a death that has spoken to men and women across all cultures, times and places of God's amazing, God's incomprehensible love.

All he asks in return is our love, our tentative, imperfect love, faith, commitment. I often find myself thinking the late Brother Roger founder of the Ecumenical Community of Taize. He would speak of mustard seed faith, God taking the littleness of our understanding, our service and love and working through them.

You may recall that Martin was talking of mustard seed faith last Sunday; that when life is hard, when life is giving us lots of knocks; times when it is hard to praise God – there is that residue of faith that keeps us going. That is what God works through to achieve his purposes in ways we can often hardly imagine.

As Martin was talking about that, he also spoke of this place, of COGS; the way this place has evolved through the strengths and weaknesses of former clergy and people. Speaking as an outsider, I can say that there is something special about this place; there is a warmth of welcome, there is an inclusiveness that you don't see in all churches. At the minute you are at an in between stage – we've said farewell to Ruth, thankful for all that she brought to this place in her ministry here. And we are not sure who is coming next. For those of you who have been brought up in the Methodist tradition, this is something strange. You are used to saying goodbye to one minister one Sunday and seeing the new one the following Sunday. For those of you brought up in the Church of Ireland this is quite normal. There are strengths and weaknesses to both systems. You can see the period without a minister as a threat or as an opportunity.

After I left the Parish of Mountmellick in County Laois, there was a gap of 12 months (No-one is suggesting that there is going to be a 12 month gap here – there were particular reasons for the 12 month gap in Mountmellick). I recall meeting a lay reader in the Parish shortly after my successor was appointed. I'll never forget what he said to me. 'Don't take this the wrong way Kevin but the 12 months we had without you was probably the best thing ever happened to Mountmellick. You had been telling us to use and offer our gifts – it was only when you weren't there that we saw what you were talking about.'

This Church is full of gifted people. You may think that your gift is not that significant. But the lesson for today is that God can take the small and

seemingly insignificant and use it in the building up of his Kingdom in this place.

Just as he took the littleness of loaves and fishes to feed a crowd, just as he took the littleness of the offering of that lady in New York to set in train a whole ministry, so God will take the likes of even you and me, the littleness, the inadequacy of our love and service. We discover the meaning of that little word ‘grace’; we discover that it doesn’t in fact all depend on me, simply my response to God’s amazing, empowering love.

Jesu, Jesu, I thee adore; help me love thee more and more.