29 July 2018: Choral Eucharist

The Ninth Sunday after Trinity

2 Kings 4: 42–44; Ephesians 3: 14–21; John 6: 1–21

The Venerable Martin Gorick, Archdeacon of Oxford

‘The Feeding of the Five Thousand’

‘Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever.’

It’s not often I welcome the rain, but I did this morning. It’s been so hot and dry for so long and it’s quite a relief to feel the change. On Thursday I was in central London, and it was sweltering! I was there for a training session, but took an hour out at lunchtime to do something unusual for me. To be a Protester!

I had no placard and I didn’t shout, but I did go to the Annual General Meeting of something called The Corporation of Church House Westminster. Next to the Abbey this is the Headquarters of the Church of England. The AGM was for the company who run the building and its conferences. They use profits to maintain the building and if there’s enough to make grants to the church. All well and good, but once a year they host something controversial. Called The Land Warfare Conference it brings together military leaders from all over the world, and is sponsored by major arms companies. It brings in good money. But should it be taking place at the headquarters of the Church of England?

The pastoral support of our service men and women in the difficult and dangerous jobs they do has always been the work of the church. But is it right to make money out of Land Warfare? I think that’s something very different. To host a military conference at Church of England central, with displays from the kind of companies that ethically the church would not invest in, seems wrong to me, and a reputational risk to the church.

I discovered that all 467 members of General Synod, the church’s governing body, are members of the Corporation and can attend the AGM, speak and vote. I thought lots might be there, but in the end I was the only one.
I made my points, I asked my questions. The Chief Executive said to me afterwards that he didn’t feel there was any ethical problem holding the Conference, and as I was the only person objecting there clearly was no wider feeling about this. I sent his comment to a couple of friends on Twitter at 10pm, wondering if others might show the concern I knew they felt. At 10.15 the same Chief Executive emailed me. He had already been ‘inundated’ with emails. It’s early days, and change won’t be easy, but at least I know now that I’m not on my own.

The disciples in our reading were feeling quite alone and facing a huge problem. 5,000 men, plus women and children, on a hillside, miles from anywhere, and getting hungry. Jesus tells them to find food, but they tell him a whole years’ wages wouldn’t be enough. Then Andrew, finds a small boy with five small loaves and two fish. He offers the little he has, which is all that he has, to Jesus. And the rest is history. Just as Sarah will do at the altar today, Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks to God, and shares the broken bread with the people. They are more than satisfied, and twelve baskets are filled with the pieces left over, with no fragment being lost. The disciples found they were not alone. That by the power at work within them they were able to accomplish far more than they could ask or imagine.

Nothing we do for God is ever too small. Whether being a lone protester, or offering your picnic when thousands are hungry, or letting someone get off the bus before you, or coming to church when most people don’t bother. Nothing we do for God is ever wasted. Not a fragment is lost. All is gathered up and used by the Spirit to work miracles which we may never know. In this Eucharist we enact this day by day, week by week. We come to church and bring all that is on our hearts to God. Bread, wine, money are brought forward, symbols of what we have, symbols of nature’s bounty and of human labour. We bring them to the Lord. We offer all that we have and all that we are to him. Just like the loaves and fishes offered by that little boy long ago on a Galilean shore. The priest, like Jesus, takes them, and offers them to God.

Then the miracle happens.

Through that stuff, the messy and inadequate offering of our life, God comes to us. As Richard Rohr once said, ‘God comes to you every day, disguised as your life.’ In this Eucharist Jesus comes to us in broken bread and wine outpoured, his body broken, his blood shed for you and me. He gives our meagre offerings back to us, transformed! We give our stuff to him, he gives himself to us. His love, his understanding. As we return
from the rail to our seats we rest in the presence of Christ, within us and all about us, before being blessed and sent out into the world.

And that’s when another miracle happens, the true multiplication of loaves and fishes. Because as we leave this place this morning, we will be Christ’s body in the world. We will be his body broken, his bread for the hungry. Through us his love will flow to a thirsty world.

The disciples gathered up all the fragments at that first great feeding of the 5000, and nothing was wasted. That’s because they were for everyone else, everyone not on that hillside, everyone who had missed out! As we receive his body and blood, his presence and strength, we are not to hoard that to ourselves, but to go out and share that with others, in the power of his love.

And in that, as I found out on Thursday night, we are never alone. Be encouraged in all that you do in your everyday life. Know that God is in you. He will bless your work for him! As that beautiful passage from Ephesians reminds us, God in Christ is at work within us and within his people the church. The power of the spirit ensures that no act of love is ever wasted.

‘Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.’