Trinity 8

Feeding of the Five Thousand

Today’s readings are all about the way in which small acts of goodness, generosity and love can be blessed and transformed for great, widespread good. It’s like watching a parable of the kingdom of heaven in action, and are an encouragement to us, as we consider the challenges we are currently facing as churches on the island.

It can be a temptation to think that we are able to do is woefully inadequate for the challenges we face; and the danger then is that we feel too discouraged to even use what we do have!

Yet today’s readings show us that anything we offer, however small or insignificant it may seem to be, can be gathered up, blessed and used by God to carry forward the mission of Christ in this place.

As Catholic Anglicans we can sometimes feel at odds with the language which is used around the words “Mission” and “Evangelism” these days. Some may think this is some new thing which is being dreamt up by people in Diocesan offices, to inflict more demands on an already overstretched laity.

It would be a mistake think like this, though, because the Gospels are peppered with examples of Jesus’ commanding his disciples to be “missional” and “evangelistic”. By virtue of our baptism, being missional and evangelistic is necessarily part and parcel of what it means to be a Christian.

As followers of Christ we should be shaped, in our choices and behaviour towards one another, so that we become attractive witnesses to our faith and others are then drawn to come to know and love the Lord through us. But there are a variety of factors shaping how Christians of different traditions go about this.

The Church of England, as we know, covers a broad spectrum of traditions; ranging from extreme Protestantism and various types of Evangelicalism at one end, to very High Anglo-Catholicism at the other.

In light of discussions about the implications of the Deanery Plan for those of us from the Catholic tradition in the Church of England, it is important to be clear about the distinctively Catholic approach to mission and evangelism, in contrast to other ways of understanding this which are around at the moment, so that we can offer the riches of our tradition into the tapestry of life on the island.

The Evangelical approach tends to place great emphasis on the individual. Bishop Philip North (Bishop of Burnley and one of the Society Bishops) described this as being an “atonement” model, whereby the world is seen as a godless place, and the saving work of Jesus is about being “plucked from the world”, as individuals make a definite choice to join a voluntary community of the redeemed.

For us Catholic Anglicans, however, the emphasis is on the Incarnation; that is to say, we hold that through the Incarnation God entered into human experience and became present and active in the world. As a consequence of this, we believe that God continues to work through human beings today, to bring about transformation of society in line with the values of the Kingdom.

Our task, therefore, is to demonstrate the presence of God in both individuals and the community, and to proclaim that “God is already here”, as we aim to get on board with God’s will and then live it out.

The way in which we do this is through the Church; because the Church has authority interpret scripture and to wake people up to the reality of God’s presence in their lives, primarily through the Eucharist.

That is to say, through the sacraments of the Church, and especially the Eucharist, the saving work of Christ comes to us. We draw life from Christ through the reception of the sacraments so that, through our reception of the “bread of angels” we are caught up in the life of God.

This is why our liturgy is so important. We pay great attention to ceremonial and the way in which our worship is conducted, not as an end in itself, but as the means through which we are fed and nourished through word and sacrament, and by which we are enabled to serve Christ more effectively in our daily lives.

As well as this, it is the emphasis of the individual in community which is important. “***We*** are the body of Christ”: “Come and belong” should be our cry, so that others may also participate in the life of Christ and begin their own life-long process of conversion.

This concept of the restoration of relationships between God and his people is a long, slow process; and this is why so many Catholic clergy tend to embed themselves in a community for a long time.

But the thrilling vision which Catholics hold of the dignity of the human person means that we have traditionally gone to places where life is hard for people. Our understanding of the infinite value of all human beings informs the priority we give to pastoral care of the frail and vulnerable; and should also give us a passion for social justice, seeing no distinction between acts of practical service and proclamation of the Gospel.

In this way, the story of Jesus becomes our story and goes to the heart of who we are. This is why we seek to bring people to Jesus through the Eucharist, so they might experience the life of Jesus for themselves; and our strong sense of heaven gives us a confidence in knowing where we are headed, so that conversion for us becomes a life-long process as, together with all God’s creation, we journey towards our ultimate home.

This is also why we have an emphasis on hospitality, and why there’s an emphasis on inviting people to our various activities and events: to bring people into fellowship with one another and to build up the community of faith. To invite poeple to “come and see”, in the way our Lord invited his first disciples.

Obviously, Covid dealt the Church a body blow in that the opportunities we used to have for people to gather were wiped out at a stroke but, as we start to open up again, we would not be doing justice to our tradition if we don’t actively seek ways to draw people into our shared life.

As we move forward though, especially in the light of the fact that we will soon be starting the recruitment process for a new priest, we would do well to consider the marks of or tradition, so that social events can also become proclamation events, which will lead to encouraging growth.

At a meeting I attended recently for Anglican Catholic clergy, Bishop Philip North was very clear about the need for Anglican Catholics to address the question, ”What does it mean to follow Jesus?”, and to be less reticent about sharing our faith because, as he put it “slow evangelism can easily mean no evangelism”.

He spoke about the need for us to have “mission action plans”, whereby we take active steps to equip lay people to talk about their faith in their daily lives; and to work out what activities we need to keep and which ones need to go, in order to focus on what really matters.

He also spoke about the importance of engaging with the world, because as he said, “the sacraments we celebrate are literally a matter of life and death. The task is urgent. We have no option but to proclaim the Christ we serve”.

Of course, going back to what I said earlier, this will be a slow process and is a bit like eating an elephant – you have to do it a bit at a time! – but now is the time, as we start to draw up the profile, to be clear about what we stand for, and to think about how we can give concrete expression to our Anglo-Catholic missional identity here in Shanklin and Lake.

Although many of us are feeling tired (and maybe even feel we’re running on empty), but let’s not lose heart. The Bible has so many examples of God doing extraordinary things through ordinary people, as evidenced by our readings this morning; and often in the most unexpected and seemingly hopeless of situations. But, as Jesus said “My grace is sufficient for you”.

We certainly face big challenges in the Church at the moment, and in our particular churches especially, but the situation is not hopeless. I’d say this is the time to place our trust even more in the living God, to stay faithful in prayer and open and alert to God’s promptings to us.

So let us come to God with open hearts minds and hands; to offer what we are and what we have (however little we might feel that to be), and ask God to take us, bless us and use us in his service. As our readings today have shown us, who knows what God might then be able to do!