

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)  
(2 Kings 4:42-44 / John 6:1-15)  
29.07.2018

The evangelist tells us that when Jesus asked Philip where they might buy some bread for the vast crowd of people following them this was *in order to test Philip*. It is suggested that Jesus wanted to check if Philip had entered into the faith vision which He, the Master, was constantly inviting His disciples to embrace. Jesus was testing Philip to see if he had grasped the importance of relying on God's providence. The desert setting in which the disciples found themselves reminds us of how, in time past, in similar circumstances, God's Chosen People of the Exodus were to learn to trust in God's providence. As they made their way through the wilderness the Israelites had to exercise trust in the Lord at each step of the journey.

Philip's answer to Jesus' question shows that the apostle was still thinking in terms of everything depending solely upon human resources. Philip calculated that with what they held in hand by way of finance – 200 denarii – they could not do much to alleviate the hunger of such a vast crowd of hungry people. He had worked out that they only had enough money at their disposal to give each one with them nothing more than a very small morsel of bread – so little, in fact, that it was to be asked if it was worth offering them anything at all. Philip's solution would have been to send the crowd away, leaving them to return to the places whence they had come hungry and unsatisfied.

Might I suggest that there are many instances in which we are inclined to reason as Philip did? I suspect that there are times when we feel somewhat overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task before us. So many hopes and expectations can be pinned upon us. People may await so much from us. We know that of ourselves – with our own very limited resources – there is little or nothing we can do to meet their needs and fulfil their unspoken desires. Aware that we have such small resources at our disposal we can settle into a mentality which suggests that since there is little or nothing we can do the wisest course of action to follow is to refrain from attempting to do anything at all.

When we reason like this, do we not betray the fact that we are thinking as if everything depends upon us – even in the domain of the Lord's service?

Fair enough, we all have only limited resources at our disposal, but, when we are engaged in the Lord's work, how important for us to remember that everything does not depend entirely upon ourselves alone. We may only have a small contribution to make, but we are called to bring our little gift to the table, as it were, whatever it may be, and place it at the Lord's service. We are called to do this trusting that God will make up for us what is lacking. As my late mother used to teach me when I was a small child: *The important thing is that you just do your best – even if it is very little. Leave it to the Lord to do the rest. He will make up for what is lacking.*

It is so important for us to remember when we are engaged in God's work that the greater part to be played is the Lord's. In the accomplishment of God's work the Lord Himself will always do more than what we do. The Lord will far exceed us in anything we may give. He will use, but He will also surpass, anything we put at His disposal. While I want to underline the importance of God's work, I want, nonetheless, to stress that the Lord clearly desires our collaboration. The part we have to play is both respected and required. It is the Lord's way to work in and through human beings to bring about the good He wants to accomplish. This is yet another manifestation of the humility of our God; yet another manifestation of the trust and confidence He places in humanity.

A point made in the opening of chapter 6 of John's gospel – a point we also find made in the Synoptic accounts of those stories relating to the Feeding of the Multitudes – is that Jesus chooses to use people as channels of His grace in these marvellous events.

The disciples were willing to use the two hundred denarii they held in hand; the little produce Andrew spotted the young boy to be carrying (maybe this was just his own packed lunch which he was willing to share) was generously offered to Jesus to make use of for the miracle He would work. We note that it was five barley loaves and a couple of very small fish that were provided by the youngster to feed 5,000 hungry men (plus women and children). Barley loaves were the bread of the poor; the small fish were more than likely salted sardine-like fish. This was the food of the poor. As I said, this may well have been the boy's own packed lunch.

In the same way as the Lord made use of that young boy whom Andrew had found and drew to Jesus' attention, so the Lord permits and even desires us to have a part in what He does for others' benefit. We can contribute so much for the well-being of others out of the little we possess if only we willingly dedicate our small resources – times, talent, possessions... and also our poverty! – to God, with the intention that He may freely work within us and through us in order to bless all those around us.

I am sure if we were to reflect on some of the times when we have been graced to see how the Lord has made use of us to accomplish some great work, what we will be led to recognise is that the limited resources we put at His disposal were used far over and beyond our wildest expectations.

I know this has often been my experience personally. I know it has been our experience as a community. I am confident that you will discover that this has also been your experience too – if only you take time to reflect upon what you have been privileged to live in the Lord's service.

When we look at the gospel text read this morning we see that neither Philip nor Andrew had any real idea about what to do. Lines from the writings of the Anglican biblical scholar, NT Wright, come to mind: *The point is obvious, but we perhaps need to be reminded of it: so often we ourselves have no idea what to do, but the starting point is always to bring what is there to the attention of Jesus. You can never tell what He is going to do with it – though part of Christian faith is the expectant hope that He will do something we hadn't thought of, something new and creative.*

I would say that just as Andrew brought the boy's five barley loaves and two small fish to Jesus' attention, so, when we bring something to Jesus' attention in prayer, we can never know what He is going to do with it. I find that it is when we reflect upon a situation – and actually name some of the elements we see to be part of that situation – in prayer, then somehow it starts to become clearer to us in God's presence what we might do to bring the matter forward. In prayer humble insights – let's even dare to call that divine inspiration – can be given to us.

I think one of the great things we are led to discover as we pray today's gospel text is that it is Jesus' way to meet the needs of the world through the inadequate means of His disciples – people like ourselves, men and women who are keenly aware of our woeful inadequacies and existential poverty. Over and against our little or nothing, the Lord brings into play His all-sufficiency. The Lord can and does supply for people's every need through the very little His servants place in His hands asking Him to bless and multiply it for good use.

Again and again the Bible shows us something which Church history also underlines: namely, how it is the Lord's way to use inadequate people who surrender what they have and allow the person they are to be used to meet the overwhelming needs of others.

I am not talking only of supplying for people's material needs. As anyone in ministry will know – including anyone who dares to stand up to speak in the Lord's name, as I am doing right now – it is the Lord's way to work in and through His servants' nothingness. The Lord's servants are constantly given to experience what the prophet Jeremiah expressed thus in his prayer recorded for us in chapter 32 of his prophecy: *Ah Lord God... nothing is too great for You!* What is far beyond us on our own, is not beyond us with the Lord. Jesus assures us elsewhere in the gospels that nothing is beyond us as long as we have the Lord's aid.

Speaking of justice, Anne Frank wrote in her diary the following words which I believe we can extend to so many domains. I quote: *How lovely that everyone, great or small, can make their contribution. You can always give something – even if only kindness.* St Benedict takes up this idea of us always having something to give – even if it is only a kind word. I think of what Benedict writes in his Rule for Monks when it comes to the Cellarer of the Monastery. (In a Benedictine monastery the Cellarer is not one who looks after the wine cellar, but the monk who attends to all the material goods of the monastery, while also exercising a spiritual paternity in regard to the brethren alongside that of the abbot) In chapter 31 of the Rule *Qualifications of the Monastery Cellarer* we read: *If goods are not available to meet a request, he will offer a kind word in reply, for it is written: A kind word is better than the best gift.* (Here Benedict quotes the biblical writer Sirach)

May the Scripture readings heard today encourage us. May they help us realise that, while we are only too aware of our own inadequacies, God's grace is capable of doing so much – so many great things – with the little we put at His disposal to work with.

Amen!