

Reflection for the Eighteenth Sunday

Over the years since food banks emerged in the UK, their use has grown considerably. One of the organisations behind food banks is the Trussell Trust. Here is a quote from their website: *Between 1st April 2018 and 31st March 2019, the Trussell Trust's food bank network distributed 1.6 million three-day emergency food supplies to people in crisis, a 19% increase on the previous year. More than half a million of these went to children.* It seems unlikely that given the current difficulties, more up to date statistics would show an improving picture. The Trust believes that there are three primary reasons for people visiting food banks for help. These are: *income not covering essential costs, benefit delays and benefit changes.* These issues are not simple in themselves and rather than blame one group or another, working together to find solutions is often the most fruitful approach. In our Gospel reading, the disciples work with Jesus to prepare the ground for the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. They draw his attention to the people's condition, bring him the food they have available and organise the people. The community come together around Jesus and their physical needs are met.

But the miracle that Jesus performs points to so much more across time, past, present and future. First, the feeding of the five thousand reminds us of those times in the past when God has fed his people. The place where this miracle happens is described as *a lonely place*, which can recall the wandering of the people of Israel on their way to the promised land. During this time God fed them, and this intervention of God is often described as *manna in the desert*. Another reference point is when God, through the prophet, Elisha feeds a hundred men with twenty loaves of barley, the account of which is in 2 Kings 4: 42-44. The message is that God feeds his people during their pilgrim journeys. At that present moment in the Gospel, Jesus and his disciples were dealing with a bereavement. John the Baptist had been executed by Herod the tetrarch and the Gospel tells us that Jesus and his disciples had withdrawn to a lonely place where they could be by themselves. Presumably to grieve, pray and comfort one another. But Jesus took pity on the crowds, who had reached there before him, and healed their sick. A contrast can be made with the account of what happened to John the Baptist which is given in the preceding verses. Herod had held a party, where anger, lust and murder took centre stage as opposed to the feeding and healing in the banquet that Jesus gives in this lonely place. The community around Jesus has a different set of values, which will continue.

As such this feeding of the five thousand points to the Last Supper and future Eucharistic celebrations. At the Last Supper Jesus takes the bread, blesses and breaks it giving it to his disciples as his body, *given up for you*. In the account of the feeding of the five thousand Jesus raised his eyes to heaven and said the blessing, broke the loaves and handed them to his disciples for distribution to the crowds. The pattern is very familiar to us from the Liturgy of the Eucharist at Mass., But we look even further forward, to the heavenly banquet where we will enjoy the presence of the Lord in the fullest sense after our earthly pilgrimage. It is described in Isaiah 25:6 *On this mountain, the Lord Sabaoth will prepare for all peoples a banquet of rich food, a banquet of fine wines, of food rich and juicy, of fine strained wines.* The past, present and future comes together in the Eucharist. God feeds us with himself on our pilgrim journey to him together with the community he calls. A community which, however feebly, tries to live the values of Jesus and not those of Herod. A meal with a difference which may inspire us to ask, why food banks? God bless, Canon David.