

Loaves and Fishes

We can sometimes find ourselves in situations beyond our abilities to cope when the gap between the resources at our disposal and the issue to be dealt with seems too great. We feel a sense of helplessness which drains us of the energy to tackle the problem. The challenge seems simply too great to be faced. In this gospel we have an example of that kind of apparent powerlessness. Jesus and the disciples are faced with a very large crowd of hungry people in a deserted place. They need to be fed and the resources to feed them don't appear to be there. The sense of being overwhelmed by the task that needs doing is audible in the comments that Jesus' disciples make. Philip states, 'Two hundred denarii would only buy enough to give them a small piece each.' Andrew comments that there is a small boy present with five barley loaves and two fish, but he asks rather despairingly, 'What is that between so many?' I am sure that people who work for aid agencies like Trocaire, Concern, Goal and Gorta often found themselves in a similar situation in those parts of the world ravaged by conflict and famine. The huge need outstrips the available resources. Yet, in that situation such workers always do whatever they can with whatever resources they have at their disposal. They don't despair; they tackle the situation as best as they can.

Jesus was just as aware as his disciples of the enormity of the task and the apparent lack of resources. However, he did not share their sense of defeatism. He saw that in some way the small boy with the five barley loaves and two fish was the key to feeding the vast crowd. We cannot be certain what exactly happened on that day in the wilderness, but it seems certain that the small boy with his few barley loaves and fish played a very important role. There was only enough food there for a simple meal for a poor family. Yet, he was willing to part with his barley loaves and fish; he handed them over to Jesus and, in some mysterious way, Jesus was able to work with the young boy's generous gift to feed everyone. One generous boy was the beginning of the feeding of the multitude. The boy's generosity gave Jesus the opening that he needed. In and through this small boy's simple gift, Jesus worked powerfully.

This is one of the very few stories about Jesus that is to be found in all four gospels. It clearly spoke very powerfully to the early church. Perhaps in and through this story the early believers came to appreciate that the Lord can use our tiniest efforts to perform his greatest works. As Paul declared in his letter to the church in Corinth that God's power is often made perfect in our weakness. The Lord can work powerfully in and through the very little that we possess if we are generous with that little. The small boy is our teacher in that regard. He gave over his few barley loaves and fish, and the Lord did the rest. So often the spontaneous generosity of children can have a great deal to teach us. In giving away the little we have we leave ourselves very vulnerable. Yet, the gospel suggests that the Lord

can work powerfully in and through that very vulnerability which is the fruit of our generosity. The Lord needs us to be generous with what we have, even though it can seem very small and very inadequate in our eyes. The Lord does not work in a vacuum; he needs us to create an opening for him to work. Without the presence of Jesus, the crowd would not have been fed. Without the presence of the small boy and his few resources the crowd would not have been fed either. The Lord needs us to be generous with what we have today if he is to continue to feed the various hungers of today's crowd, whether it is the basic hunger for food, or the hunger for shelter, for a home, for friendship, for community, for acceptance or the deeper spiritual hunger for God. The gospel teaches us never to underestimate the significance of even the tiniest efforts we make to be generous with the resources we have at our disposal, whether it is resources of money, or time or some ability or other.

All four evangelists saw a connection between what happened in the wilderness on that day and what happened at the Last Supper and what happens at every Eucharist. Just as Jesus transformed the small boy's simple gifts of five barley loaves and two fish into a feast for thousands, so he transforms our simple gifts of bread and wine into a spiritual feast for all, the bread of life and the cup of salvation. The way the Lord works in the Eucharist is how he works in the rest of our lives. He takes the little we offer to him and by means of it, in the words of Saint Paul, he is 'able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.' [Martin Hogan]