

Sermon – Sunday 29th July 2018 – 9.30 am

How often do you find yourself assuming that things are too good to be true? Perhaps like me you have received those letters, which contain false cheques, congratulating you on the £20,000 (or some such) that you have won. Except that you know that on reading the small print you have won nothing of the kind. You may have the chance of winning such a sum, should you, along with countless others, enter some kind of prize draw, giving away your personal information in the process.

The nature of publicity causes us to become increasingly sceptical. If it sounds too good to be true, the chances are it is. Cheap flights with a significant tax, a huge premium if you want to take luggage, extortionate prices for on board food. Even in the sales in high street shops you find yourself at the 50% off rail looking at something marked down from £50 to £35 and realise that in tiny lettering the sign actually reads “up to 50% off”.

And of course the sales mentality is part of our political life, too. I wonder how many of you actually read the party manifestos before you voted in the last election? I know that I didn't, not because I am not interested, but because those that I have read feel like a combination between a sales pitch and aspiration with very little substance behind them. The press can appear to enjoy nothing more than forcing politicians to pin down very specific policy ideas, only to cry outrage when they aren't fulfilled – and all in the name of holding people to account. I should stress that I am very supportive of a free press and indeed of holding politicians to account, but the way we do that and our motivations for doing it impact on the way we all experience life.

When I was doing hospital chaplaincy I attended a generic induction day with all hospital staff from administrators and managers to nurses and doctors. I remember an HR manager presenting for 15 minutes, during which time one of her messages was that we all needed to remember to smile and look like we cared because that made people feel better and made for a more positive working environment. Now call me naïve, but I'm not sure that smiling when I enter Intensive Care with someone seriously ill is going to be appropriate. But more importantly, those people called to vocations in medicine are generally naturally caring people. So I wonder whether the right question is more about why naturally caring people are under such stress that they're unable to be themselves? Why they have to be *told* to smile? It's hard to tackle underlying issues – sometimes it can feel impossible. But every time we encourage people to look happy rather than asking questions about why they aren't, we continue to build a society in which we feel that we simply can't take anything at face value. They might look like the care, but do they really? The chances are it's too good to be true.

Where Jesus is concerned, it is never too good to be true. This might sound like a particularly bold claim on the morning when our gospel reading is the feeding of the five thousand – not something most of us see every day – but let's think about it a bit more. The thing is, all kinds of scholars have tried to find ways in which the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand might have happened. I have heard various examples, including the suggestion that actually people did have food with them, so once the 5 loaves and 2 fish were offered up for sharing, everyone joined in and so there was plenty. Through to the complete acceptance that a miracle took place which is beyond question and explanation.

Now I don't know what happened that day when 5000 people were fed, but my starting point is that where God is concerned, it's never too good to be true. And I also believe that in everything that he does, Jesus shows us something about God. And for me, however we choose to understand – or perhaps more accurately not understand – miracles, this is a good place to start.

It is in God's nature to feed us – to feed us physically and of course to feed our minds and spirits, too. God longs for us to be fed, to be nurtured and looked after. And God's nature is also one of abundance. So perhaps the key to making sense of the story is to ask not "how did it happen" but "what does God want us to understand about God?" After the five thousand have eaten as much as they want, there is still something left over. Where God is concerned, generosity abounds. Do you notice, too, that Jesus invites the disciples to be part of this miracle. God longs for us to see the world as God does, to see where there is abundance and to give generously. Because God knows that it is in seeing the world this way that life – true life – abides.

Whenever I read the feeding of the five thousand, and think of the abundance, I cannot help but think of those who go without food. Across the world there are many; even in this country there are some. There is enough, though – we all know that. There is enough food in this world to feed everyone. And for me, that is part of what Jesus is saying in this miracle. Remember, there is enough.

You and I understand that the reasons which prevent the world's food being shared equally are many and varied – and are frankly beyond each one of us to solve on our own. There is so much in life that can leave us with a sense of powerlessness. But what Jesus shows us is that we can do *something*. Not only that, but perhaps that we *must* do something. And we can always do something. All the while that we have something to share, we are called to share it – our collections for the food bank are one way that we do that as a church. For those of a campaigning disposition, continuing to lobby politicians to continue to reduce debts to those who can't afford it, to share our plenty with those who have less is another tangible way of doing something. Jesus didn't solve world hunger by feeding the five thousand. He showed us, though, that there is another kind of economy. And he showed us that we can live according to that economy even in a world where not everyone does. Not because we will bring hunger to an end, but because we believe in an economy that could. And because we believe that everyone who lives according to that economy knows what real life is.

In his book "The Divine Dance", Richard Rohr says: "God does not love you because you are good. God loves you because God is good. I should just stop writing right here. There's nothing more to say, and it'll take the rest of your life to internalize this."

God *is* good. God *does* love you. Just as God loves all those who are hungry, or thirsty, or are at their wits' end in other ways. Believing that – really believing it, so that we allow it to transform all that we do – is, indeed, a life's work. I love the fact that Jesus walking on water comes after this miracle. Do you notice that the storm does not get stilled in this miracle? Faith is not a guarantee against challenges in life – indeed, it isn't a guarantee against tragedy. But it is a promise. A promise of love and presence. People hunger and thirst, physically, emotionally, intellectually; the storm rages, but Jesus is there on the water, loving his disciples, and giving access to God's abundant gifts. God *is* good; God *does* love you. It isn't too good to be true. So what does it mean to live like we really believe it?

Amen