

**A Church Year ending is like another stitch complete. Even as the next weft begins. And the needles beat their rhythmic tattoo. Share. Pray. Fast. Repeat.**

**I don't know if you're a fan of Desert Island Discs. But if you've ever heard it or heard of it you will be aware of the basic premise of the show. Stranded in an imagined wilderness, the individual featured on any given episode is essentially asked what you would keep if you could only chose from all your treasures, a handful to speak for them all - which texts, which pieces of music, which luxuries - not just that you *have* valued most highly, but that you can imagine *continuing* to value, day in day out, across a limitless horizon. The idea, and indeed the effect, is that what is revealed by a person's choices - by their loves - and their interwoven histories and hopes, is the heart of the person themselves.**

**When the Irish Comedian Ardal O'Hanlon - most famous for his interpretation of the role of Fr Dougal Maguire in Father Ted - was asked on the show to name the two books he would bring with him, apart from the Complete Works of Shakespeare and the Bible, were he marooned on a Desert Island, he answered - with apologies for the accent which is actually that of my Grandmother more than of Mr O Hanlon: "Well Sue - the first book I would bring would be a great big inflatable book. And the second would be entitled - How to make oars out of sand.**

**Perhaps he wasn't taking the exercise entirely seriously...**

**It is nonetheless the case - that as we *are* indeed what we love - our favourite things, that to which we repeatedly return, reveals what is most important to us. Whether we like it or not.**

**And the same applies to the Church's favourite scripture. Perhaps you didn't know she had one. One passage she would take with her if *she* were shipwrecked, and not only reduced to keeping just four books including the Bible, but able to rescue from the floods, just one page torn from holy writ, before all the rest was lost - along with her silver plate and her fancy clothes. It's a ludicrous conceit of course. But if there was one such passage - at least according to the lectionary that broadly persisted in the church for 1200 years or so - it would be this one. The Feeding of the 5000.**

**Today's Gospel is the only example of scriptural repetition in the whole cycle of readings appointed for the year. Of more than 150 Biblical texts used, and the thousands that *could* have been used, there is only one text, today's, that is used twice. And it is itself the account of the only miracle repeated in all four gospels. A fact which makes the repetition of this particular extract from John's Gospel seem even more calculated and purposeful - because even if you did think the story of the multiplying loaves and fish was the single Gospel story worth revisiting in all of the Sundays of the year, there are still no fewer than four separate Gospel passages you could have chosen to do it.**

**And yet - here, this morning, is the self same account from John that marked Laetare Sunday - the exact midway point in the Lenten journey to the cross - now marking the turning point of our calendar...**

**So why is this story so important? Why is it uniquely privileged by Gospel Writers and Lectionary Composers alike? And what by the way does it have to do with that *final* crowning moment when the entirety of history has run its course, which in her later years the Church chose to mark as the Feast of Christ the King?**

**Well, let's back up a tiny bit.**

**Last week we considered the idea that the same lectionary writers had cunningly positioned the passage about "rendering unto God that which is God's" in the concluding readings that gather *up* the threads of the church year, because the process of receiving, treasuring, rendering to receive again - is the shuttling back and forth of gift and gratitude, *for* which our lectionary is the weave pattern. And because the telos of that process is that we, and all creation, be finally "knit together in love, unto all the riches of full **COMMUNION**, and the knowledge of the mystery of God\*."**

**This is the process which, in last week's text about tax and table tennis, we characterised as being that of Eden, and the Altars of Israel. But of course it is even more fully the process at work on *our* altar - at our *Eucharist* - and in the person of Christ himself.**

**And so it is entirely *fitting* that it should find its final scriptural expression each year, in the Gospel writers' favourite miracle, and the lectionary writers favourite text, as it does each week in the Church's favourite rite, to which that passage alludes. Because this process of rendering - continually represented by our lectionaries and ceremonies - this process of which we are part - is unabashedly and unequivocally...sacramental.**

**It is sacramental because, as we discussed, it always concerns the turning of stuff into love.**

**It is sacramental because, as our Epistle spells out, that is a process of incorporation into Christ's own body, entirely dependent upon its already Crowned Head.**

**And it is sacramental because, for all its fulfilment is eternally established, it is not finished.**

**So, first, whatever else is being described in the Feeding of the 5000, it is worth affirming that this is an account of that miracle to which the whole of creation was ordered in the beginning - the miracle of finite matter being made into limitless love.**

**If you ask a primary school class what this story is about they might say it is about sharing. Children are uniquely attuned to the language of sharing, because it has been foisted *upon* them from day one.**

Share is perhaps the word little children dread most. Like an unbeatable card in a game of trumps. Just when you have fought off the grasping attempts of another child, or worse a sibling, to steal from you whatever you were minding your own business playing with, someone, usually a mother, steps in with that word, and you know the fight is lost.

Share.

Even though I had it first, even though it's mine, even though they only want it because I've got it, and they will probably break it and not really be bothered... all the arguments spoken and unspoken, all the denial, anger, bargaining and so on, is always trumped by 'share'.

And the funny thing is, for all the reluctance, there seems to be in most of us as children, from the very beginning, some recognition that 'share' from the mouth of a mother, from the mouth of a person who has already literally shared their life, their body and blood with you, is all the more difficult to refuse.

Eventually beyond tears and tantrums...Oh all right. They can have it...

What most of us *don't* realise, until much much later, is that mothers aren't just the majority 'share'-holders in these stand offs, it's not just that they have invested too much in the business of sharing to be outvoted - any more than it is simply a question of them having the executive power to enforce sharing - that is impossible...

It's that what distinguishes a person as a mother, in something other than the purely biological sense, is that they have already experienced and understood something *about* sharing, which has nothing to do with the objects we fight over, the things that can be taken out of our hands, or broken in half and offered to another.

They already know - in the marrow of their bones - about the miracle that turns accidental stuff like toys or teddy bears, milk or biscuits, or, well, *marrow*, into something else entirely.

They have felt it happen inside them.

They already know, what all of those miracles, in fact what *all* miracles, are actually *about* - so they have something more powerful than power at their disposal, and that is very hard to resist.

In the *first* miracle in John's Gospel, the first miracle of our church year, we heard Jesus' Mother effectively say to *him* - share. And his response at that wedding feast, as in this desert famine, is a perfect example of this very miracle, invoked by almost every mother (before or since) giving the same instruction to her child.

So, now, here are the disciples, in like manner, told by *Christ* to share...

Asked to perform a miracle.

And their protests are predictable enough:  
Where can we find enough to share with all *these* people?

Even when a little boy, who must have been paying careful attention to *his* mum, volunteers what he has - the disciples instantly sum up the whole problem with sharing in one sentence.

Share?

I had something, and you had nothing. Now you have something, and I have a bit less. But what if another child comes along... If we *stick* to this sharing thing, *You* will have less, and I will have less still. And if there was another? And another. Well, then we would all have hardly anything. And what if there were thousands and thousands and thousands of other children...

What - you might then ask - is so little among so many.

The trouble with sharing - as every child will tell you - is that every time you share. You have less. And less and less...

That is *un-less*... as in *this* story, something extraordinary happens. Here they give thanks, and break and share and break and share, and they don't all end up with less, and less and less, they don't end up with the same as they began with, they end up with more. More than they had, more than anybody had, more than everybody put together had. More than they can give away...

Superhuman power? Well. Yes. Miracle? *Well*, yes. But more than that says John. A sign. A miracle that points to what all miracles are about, to that thing which is *more* powerful than human power, more powerful *than* power full stop. Which we celebrate precisely on the feast of Christ's Kingship, as we had, not coincidentally on Mothering Sunday. That secret embodied in motherhood itself:

There is only one thing that can be shared without being reduced, given away without leaving less, the thing that not only becomes more in the giving, but that into which *ordinary* things can be turned *by* sharing... Love.

... That very thing which is miraculously materialised by a child choosing to share a biscuit, or a loved object with another.

Maybe we would always have been more responsive to *our* mothers if every time they wanted to say share, they said instead - "Do a miracle. Turn a *thing* into *love*." Break it or pour it out and offer it, and turn it into more than it is. Maybe we would be even now be more responsive to God, if every time He challenged us to share He did the same.

Or perhaps the Father, and mothers alike, should be even *more* direct, and just say what they are *really* wanting to tell, and teach, us to do. Love. Love one another.

But the thing is, if someone tells us to love, we are often just as confused as to what to actually *do*, as if they'd said to us 'do a miracle'. So perhaps they're right to start, as our Lord did, as Trinity season did, with a simple instruction, however testing...

Share.

This is the process we are involved in - and it is unabashedly sacramental because it concerns at every point the turning of stuff into love.

And although beneath layers of theology and ritual familiarity, we might sometimes lose that basic essence of the sacrament, before we set off into another year of its outworking, we are pointedly reminded by our Gospel: This sacred mystery is not up in the heavens that you should say who will fetch it down for us, it is on your lips and in your hands - it is about your actual life, and the actual things in it, and the call for them, and you, to partake in another substance entirely... This is about the washing up in the sink of your shared house, the change in your pocket and the beggar at your gates, the moment you might have taken what is rightfully yours but you chose to loose the one in your debt...

But lest we set off down a road that leads to despair, as we still find this sharing excruciatingly difficult; as we repeatedly fail to weave even the thinnest fabric of love out of the rags and riches at our disposal - this process we are called into is sacramental *also* in the sense that it actually IS in heaven.

Or rather - it's *source* is in Heaven, in the person of the Risen Christ. And what we are called to is not a bare sharing of our own too limited resources, but a growing participation *by* sharing, in his limitless self-giving, as those who are continually receiving grace in abundance, even as we pour it out...

The process we are involved in is *sacramental* - because it must continually acknowledge itself to be a question of being incorporated into *Christ's* action, *Christ's* resurrection life, *Christ's* body. And *at* every point, it is dependent on the Head - on the fact that in the person of Jesus this miracle of mere matter being turned into deathless love, has already taken place; in his Ascension and Accession, we - humanity, the created - are already part of the Divine Love which is our destiny. And it is only to the degree that we participate in his risen life that any of that miraculous transformation takes place in the detail of ours.

**Like the miracles of the loaves and fish, every aspect of Holy Communion is designed to make this plain - it is Christ who is its instigator, Christ who is its focus, Christ who is its agent, Christ whose Body is broken and shared in it, Christ whose body is knit together and grown up by it. It is Christ's forgiveness, Christ's peace, Christ's mission...**

**The process in which we are called to participate is sacramental in that it all flows from the Risen Head like water from a well-spring to the ocean, and our task is only ever to enter its stream. It is sacramental in that it is that unique form of human action, in which our agency is inseparably woven into another's - in which we are never doing anything, but joining in the eternal conversation between the Father, and the One who intercedes at His right hand continually.**

**And finally, the process whose pattern is laid out in the Church Year is sacramental - because its source and telos might be in heaven, its outcome might be fixed as an anchor within the veil. But it is not finished.**

**Our miracle of the loaves and fish might seem over when all the people are satisfied. But it is not finished - our Lord sends them out to collect up every crumb. It might seem over when Christ has provided bread like manna in the wilderness, but it is not finished - our Lord has just begun revealing what the Bread of Life really is.**

**It might seem over when 5000 have been fed. But it is not finished, because not long after, Jesus does it again with 4000 more. The miracle is repeated because it is ongoing.**

**And by the same token this is the text that marks the culmination of our whole year, because the year might be finished, but the process of turning all created stuff into love - the process of creation's coronation, in which the ultimate accolade is bestowed upon earthly things...the process which culminates in dust-formed humanity sitting down on the throne of the Eternal King of Kings, that sacramental process of which we are part is not finished. In fact, as St Paul says, *Christ the King*, is the beginning...**

**The Gospel the Church chose as its desert island text reminds us that the process we participate in is sacramental, because in the end, if you could make oars out of sand, why stop at that - just escaping? Why not transform the whole island, every grain of dust - into a city, a temple, a person, a perfect body of persons in consummate communion? Why not turn the whole thing into love itself.**

**Well, say the lessons of the Sunday next before advent, that is exactly the plan. And the one in whom all that fullness will finally dwell, is the one who sends us out now - to go round again, to go into the hedgerows, to gather every speck and scrap, to bring the still scattered pieces of our own lives, back to the altar, until all things are reconciled to God in Him.**

**A Church Year ending is like another stitch complete. Even as the next weft begins. And the needles beat their rhythmic tattoo. Share. Pray. Fast. Repeat.**

