

Year A

Matthew 14:13-21

When on holiday in Northumberland recently we visited the beautiful market town of Alnwick with its stunning castle, the home of the Duke of Northumberland. Alnwick also has a very fine second-hand bookshop and on a rainy day a browse there helps to pass the time. I've bought at least one book every time I've visited over the years. But my latest purchase from the shop wasn't a book at all but a CD box set of Richard Strauss' *Salome*. I'm not very familiar with Richard

Strauss' music and I wanted to explore it a bit and so I bought the recording second-hand. I can't say that I'm enjoying listening to it. It's challenging stuff to listen to but it's interesting and that's especially the case because it's based on a New Testament story, the murder of John the Baptist. Oscar Wilde had written the play in the early 1890s. The play tells in one act the Biblical story of Salome, stepdaughter of the tetrarch Herod Antipas, Caesar's puppet ruler, who, to her stepfather's dismay but to the delight of her mother Herodias, requests the head of John the Baptist on a silver platter as a reward for

dancing the dance of the seven veils. It's gruesome subject matter and Strauss' music reflects that. Our Gospel text today opens with the words; "Now when Jesus heard this.....". So it is important that we establish what exactly Jesus had heard. He had just been told about the brutal execution of John the Baptist. Often when we here terrible news of loss we just want to get away and to be alone. Jesus wanted to grieve privately and he chose the wilderness as the best place for that to happen. He was no stranger to the desert. Remember just after he was baptised he was sent out into the desert

where he was tempted for forty days and nights? There Satan tempted him to turn the stones into bread so that his hunger would be satisfied. Here the desperately hungry crowds would be surrounded by stones and would naturally long for the stones to be turned into bread. But Jesus had refused to do Satan's bidding and so could the crowds hope for a different outcome here? The Psalmist asked intriguingly in Psalm 78:19; "Can God spread a table in the wilderness?" Well, we will soon find out. The location is vital to understanding the miracle. Remember that

the people of Israel spent forty years wandering about in the desert learning that it might be a good idea to trust God's compassion and generosity. They never really learned the lesson. Here, the wilderness, the appropriate place for Jesus to be, considering he was in mourning for John the Baptist, becomes the place where the people will experience God's love afresh. The people, departing from the towns and cities with Jesus, were walking to a different place, a different realm almost, where God's ways would reign and not Caesar's. A coin discovered in the Holy Land from this era

has the head of Nero on one side and Ceres, the goddess of agriculture on the other side. The implication was that Caesar supplied the means by which the people could enjoy the fruit of the land and every time they put their hands in their pockets and pulled out a coin they were reminded of that fact. Jesus and the crowds moving away from civilised territory found themselves in a different place where different rules applied.

Of course, the hungry masses provided an enormous challenge to the poor disciples. What were they to do with all these people and such a meagre quantity of food? It was

an impossible situation and so the disciples recommended the only course of action that made any sense. Send the crowds away back to the villages where they could buy food for themselves. Who is going to argue with that; it made sound sense? But remember the context! For Jesus, the recommendation to send the people away was tantamount to saying let's send these dear people back to Rome. Let's hand them back to the rule of Rome where they can be properly taken care of. No, no way! The wilderness is the place of God's grace and Jesus knew it. There's a wonderful portrayal

of this scene of the feeding of the five thousand in Pasolini's 1964 film, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*. If you haven't seen the film I would highly recommend it to you. You may be able to buy it on DVD. The miracle in the film is portrayed as a joyful celebration. Pasolini has no interest in the mechanics of what happened, and neither did Matthew. He was interested in the faces of the receiving crowd who were tasting of the Kingdom of Heaven. Here was the answer to the brutal rule of Rome which had done its worst to Jesus' forerunner and which was oppressing and starving the life

out of the people of Israel. Here is the abundance of God's love and compassion shown in the actions of Jesus Christ.

Note that as this miracle falls within the accounts of the disciples being sent out and their preparation for tough experiences so this miracle taught them important principles about their work. They complain to Jesus that they have 'nothing but', and Jesus will not accept that attitude. YOU give them something to eat!! Jesus did not feed the five thousand but he told the disciples to get on with it and do it. Stop your

complaining and start loving, really loving these people.

C.S. Lewis wrote; “God seems to do nothing of Himself which He can possibly delegate to His creatures. He commands us to do slowly and blunderingly what He could do perfectly and in the twinkling of an eye.”¹ He had incredible patience with his disciples as he demonstrated his willingness to wait while they took a while to realise that he was serious.

¹ C.S. Lewis 1960 *The World's Last Night and Other Essays* New York: Harcourt, Harvest Books, pp 8-9.

We mustn't miss too the Sacramental significance of this story. Jesus offered a prayer to heaven and blessed and broke the loaves and then he distributed them to the disciples. There was an early Christian heretical sect called the Marcionites who sought to deny the goodness of the physical world. Here Jesus is described as taking that which is physical and multiplying it, not diminishing it or transforming it. This was not water into wine here it is the blessing of abundance that we are celebrating. The hungry and the desperate come to Jesus and find their needs, all their needs, met in him.

The disciples like priests or ministers are asked to step out by faith and offer the blessing to the people. We continue in the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand every time we celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper together. And it is a miracle.

An alcoholic became a Christian believer and was asked how he could possibly believe all the nonsense in the Bible about miracles.

"You don't believe that Jesus changed the water into wine do you?" "I sure do, because in our house Jesus changed the whiskey into furniture."² Do you believe in miracles? Do

² Stedman, Ray 1996 *Authentic Christianity* Discovery House

you believe in the Kingdom of Heaven or are you going to place your trust in Caesar, in the kingdoms of this world? That would be a dumb question to put to the satisfied crowds. They had met with Christ and were fed. Let us believe today as we journey in the wilderness because the journey will not go on forever and soon we will be home.