

SERMON

Bishop Philip North

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I remember when I was a teenager, I decided it was about time I earned some money. And so, I got myself a job. A job that comprised delivering free advertising newspapers to the streets in the neighbourhood. Well, a few days later I got home from school to find my mother looking white and aghast; 'The newspapers arrived' she said. 'They are in the garage.' They were indeed in the garage. In fact, they were filling the garage from floor to ceiling, pallet after pallet of these free newspapers. And along with them was a map, a map which showed the area I had to deliver the newspapers to, and one which seemed to cover most of North London. I was horrified. I had been confronted with an impossible job.

Well that day as I looked at those newspapers I felt, doubtless, exactly like the disciples felt, in the passage in St Matthew's gospel that Fr Kevin has just read to us. They too were confronted with what seemed to be an impossible job. Jesus had been followed to a lonely place by a vast crowd. A crowd of 5,000 men, plus women, plus children; a huge multitude. Well he teaches them for the course of the day but as it comes towards evening, the disciples say 'Jesus, come on, the day's nearly over, send the crowd away so they can find something to eat.' And that's when Jesus gives them the impossible job. 'You feed them', he says. Sounds so simple, doesn't it, but what a crazy thing to say! All they've got is 5 loaves and 2 fish, how on earth can they feed a crowd of such huge size with mere scraps? Well the disciples need to learn something critical about the rhythm of the Christian life. Look what happens next: Jesus accepts this paltry offering of loaves and fish and he blesses it. And then, first of all, he feeds the disciples. After they've been fed, the disciples then go and feed the crowd. And they find that they can feed this vast crowd. There's enough food to satisfy their hunger. They can feed the crowd because Jesus has first fed them. And that's the lesson they needed to learn about the Christian life. Jesus feeds us so that we can feed the world. Jesus feeds us so that we can feed the world.

The Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham is, first of all, a place of feeding. Remember Mary, who's at its heart, she's the one who fed Jesus from her breast. And the young pilgrims who would so love to be gathering at Walsingham this week come, first of all, to be fed by Jesus, to be fed by Mary's child. They're fed by Jesus generously, as they study the scriptures together; they're fed as they confess sin and pray for healing; they're fed in the community they form as they find Christian friendship and good fellowship. These, mostly urban, teenagers are fed also by the sheer beauty of creation in North Norfolk. And they are fed, above all, as they gather day-by-day, by the Eucharist. These young pilgrims are fed abundantly, by Jesus, who is the living bread.

But if that were all, it would be pure self-indulgence. Walsingham isn't just a place of feeding: it's equally a place of sending. The most important thing any pilgrim on any pilgrimage does is to go home again. And that's the case for these young pilgrims. Having been fed by Jesus, they go home to feed a hungry world. And they do that by simply trying to live the Christian life, more vividly, more confidently, living not for self but for service, putting faith into words, sharing the good news of Jesus. At Walsingham, Jesus feeds them so they can feed the world.

We live today in a desperately hungry world. Many people hunger for justice, because they are suffering because of the actions of others, or from greed, or from debt. Many people today hunger for forgiveness, or for compassion.

Many people hunger for purpose, desperate for something that will make sense of their lives and give them some idea of who they are and what they are for. And the thing that all these hungry people have in common is that they can only be satisfied by Jesus, Jesus who is the living bread.

Well in a world of such hunger, Jesus points to us as he pointed to the disciples, and he says, 'You feed them.' Well it just seems an impossible job, doesn't it? How can small bands of Christians hope to meet such immense, global hunger? Well, remember the rhythm of Christian life that the disciples had to learn; first of all Jesus feed us. If we open our heart, Jesus feed us in rich abundance. He feeds us when we meet with him in the scriptures; he feeds us in the bread and wine of the Eucharist; he feeds us in the joy of Christian fellowship; he feeds us in all those ways we meet him in our daily lives. Jesus feeds us.

But he doesn't feed us for the sake of it. No, Jesus feeds us so that we can go and feed a hungry world. Whenever we put faith into practice, we are feeding the hungry. When we make a stand for justice, when we give voice to the voiceless, and stand alongside the poor, we are feeding a hungry world. Whenever we seek to put faith into practice and tell people what matters to us, and stand up for right, we are feeding a hungry world. Whenever we live not for ourselves but for others, and seek to serve and meet need, we are feeding a hungry world. Whenever we show hospitality, compassion, joy to others, we are feeding a hungry world. Jesus feeds us, so that we can feed the world.

Today then, in our worship, let yourself be fed by Jesus. Allow him to enter anew into your heart and into your life. And then go, go and feed a hungry world with him, who is the living bread. Amen.