

Sermon for Sunday 2nd August 2020
Isaiah 55:1-5, Matthew 14:13-21

Lammas or 'Loaf-mass' is an English feast in origin, held on 1 August as a thanksgiving for the first-fruits of the wheat harvest and is the first harvest festival of the year. Traditionally, a newly baked loaf from the first wheat harvest at Lammastide was presented before God within the communion service of that day, and His blessing was sought – on the rest of the harvest and on the people. Congregations came both in thanksgiving and to offer themselves and the fruits of their labours to God. In many parts of England, tenants were bound to present freshly harvested wheat to their landlords on or before the first day of August so that the loaf could be made from several different farmers first wheat crop. A wonderful picture of different people coming together, bringing themselves and what they had, offering it to God and giving thanks for his blessings. Much the same as we do today. The festival largely ceased at the Reformation, but reference to Lammas Day continued in the Prayer Book calendar, and the practice has been revived in some places in more recent years.

Although most of us won't manage to celebrate communion together just yet, I thought it entirely appropriate to celebrate Lammastide today, it was 1st August yesterday and all around us are signs of the maturing of crops and the beginnings of harvest. And just as those early Anglo Saxon Christians gathered so we too gather today, in different ways – bringing ourselves and what we've got, offering it to God and giving thanks for the blessings he gives. For me, these last few months have made me even more thankful to God, although we have had things taken from us, we have lived with uncertainty, but I really have felt that all the things for which I am grateful but take for granted so often, have been brought into sharper focus. I am so thankful to God.

So, to our bible readings. You may pick up a common theme in our readings and in our marking of Lammastide, that of provision. Isaiah chapter 55 starts with the words 'everyone who thirsts, come to the waters, and you that have no money come, buy and eat. Come buy wine

and milk without money and without price'. And then our gospel reading brings us the well-known story of the feeding of the five thousand. A God of provision, abundant provision. Both stories remind us that God is not a God of the bare minimum – if he was, then the food for the five thousand would have simply been adequate, enough to keep them going but instead we read that there was much left over. And if God was simply about adequate provision, rather than abundance, Isaiah may have talked about the free provision of bread and water, but instead he also includes wine and rich food.

Today, this Lammastide, when we are still in a time of restriction, a time when we may feel that things have been taken from us – contact with others, holidays, good health, certainties, celebrations, I think being reminded of the God of abundance is a good thing.

The feeding of the five thousand is a very well-known story. It features, unusually in all four gospels and we know how it goes. Jesus feeds a very large crowd by depending on a tiny amount of food. A small amount of bread, and a couple of fish being used by God to feed the multitude, not just meeting their needs, but providing abundantly. Verse 20 says 'they all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve baskets of broken pieces that were left over!'

Now, it is sometimes tempting to take the biblical stories of miracles and try to explain how they could have been done, rather than taking from them a bigger meaning or a greater understanding of the person or Kingdom of God. I remember someone once trying to explain how the feeding of the five thousand came about. The theory went like this - five thousand people all sitting on a hill side listening to Jesus speak. He speaks well and the hours pass. People begin to notice their stomachs rumbling, but they also know that there are many others around them probably feeling the same thing so they don't want to open the packed lunches they have brought along because each of them know that if they get their lunch out, then the hungry people around them might want some of it. So people hide the fact that they had their packed lunches,

until eventually some sweet boy – not actually mentioned in Matthew’s account – said that he would share, and as Jesus gave thanks to God gradually everybody gets out and opens up their own lunches and shares anyway and, of course, there was too much food for everyone in the end – as there always is in Bring and Share lunches. So, the theory goes, the miracle of the story is not that Jesus turned five loaves and two fishes into food for five thousand but that he made five thousand rather mean human beings share what they had – and some would say that that is a much harder miracle – and we still need it!

Now all of that’s very well – and who knows what really happened on that sunny day up on the hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee – but I am not sure the gospel writers tell the stories in order for us to try and grapple with how they happened, but that they tell the stories to show us who Jesus is and what kind of God we see in him, what his kingdom is like.

People followed Jesus up the hill not because they thought he was a nice man or because he was interesting entertainment for an afternoon, but because they had heard him speak and seen him act. He had been trying to withdraw for some quiet and the crowds were following. They wanted to be with him, to hear him.

However this miracle might or might not be explained or understood, it is a sign of God’s presence, it is a sign of God’s provision, it is a sign of God’s abundance. And it is a sign that God can and does take the offering we give, whatever it is and however small or anonymous or insignificant or restricted it might seem and does something with it – to provide and to bless abundantly.

It is interesting that in Matthew’s gospel the account of feeding the five thousand follows the many parables that we have been looking at over the last couple of weeks. It struck me this week as I read it again and thought back to the sermon of last week that in a way Jesus is doing, Jesus is living out, what he had been saying in those parables. Last week we read of the tiny mustard seed becoming the largest tree, we read of

the small amount of yeast hidden in the flour that makes dough for bread for a whole village. Jesus has been saying that the kingdom of God is like this and now he acts, he does this miracle which tells us the same thing. In the kingdom of God a little can be a huge amount and hidden, unseen actions can have amazing tangible effects.

One of the questions that Debbie asked us last week, when she preached, was 'what mustard seed do we have that we could sow this week?' This week, perhaps we can rephrase it to 'what are the loaves and fishes we can give to God this week, and do we trust that he can multiply what we offer to provide abundantly for others?'

So this Lammastide, be reminded of the God who invites all to eat and drink with him, freely without cost; be reminded of the God who can take the small or the limited or the inadequate or the severely restricted and provide abundantly; and be reminded of the God who calls us to be part of, and to reflect to others, his extraordinary, abundant, love and grace and provision and blessing. Amen