

The 8th Sunday of Trinity 8

A few years ago I was on holiday in Avignon South East France. I was in a restaurant and I saw a story on wall about an Italian poet. In 1337, there lived a famous Italian scholar and poet who, though he enjoyed life in the big city, found that all the stresses of urban life were turning his brains to mush.

Francesco Petrarch had taken minor orders and was living in Avignon, at that time the seat of the papacy. He had made a name for himself at the papal court, but one day he packed everything and took off for a quiet retreat in the country, there to find some peace and nurse his troubled spirit.

He had time to enjoy solitude, even time to write about its attraction:

Not to be crowded, pushed, put upon, trod on;
not to be dragged to banquets when you aren't hungry;
not to be forced to talk when you'd rather say nothing;
not to be greeted at awkward moments;
not to be clutched and held at street corners;
not to spend the day, according to fashion's foolish decree, gazing at passing crowds.

Think what it means not to grow old amid such boredom...

Petrarch's getaway shocked his friends and admirers in Avignon, who thought him quite mad to bury his talents in the wilderness. His escape to the wilds of Vaucluse, twenty miles away from civilisation, caused a sensation; even some bishops tried to persuade him to leave the solitary life to the monks and return to court. But Petrarch was insistent: what he was looking for could only be found in solitude, he said. And what he was looking for was himself. And there started what was to become modern day Humanism.

In today's Gospel we hear how Jesus tries to make his getaway to a secure hiding place. John the Baptist has just been executed at Herod's court, and when Jesus hears the news about the cruel death of this great spiritual leader, he withdraws to a lonely place: literally "to the wilderness". He tries to escape to the one place that is uninhabited by people, the same kind of place where John the Baptist himself lived.

But as the crowds sought out John the Baptist in the wilderness, so the crowds now seek out Jesus. They seem to have a nose for hideouts. Some of you are like that! And when Jesus sees them, he has no spirit to play hide-and-seek. He knows why they are looking for him. They have come with their family and friends who are afflicted and troubled; they have come with their hope that he will do something. Jesus takes pity on them and heals their sick. Jesus' desire for solitude has been overtaken by his compassion for the many people who look to him for help, and he is still ministering to the sick when evening comes.

Meanwhile the disciples see a problem with having such a large number of people on their hands and they give Jesus the benefit of their pastoral advice: “Send the people away and they can go to the villages to buy themselves some food.” And when all the people go away, Jesus can be left in peace. There is no suggestion in the Gospel that the crowds are actually looking to Jesus to supply them with food; but Jesus sees no problem anyway. He challenges his disciples: “Give them something to eat yourselves.” They point to the little they have, but Jesus takes the little they have, raises his eyes to heaven, blesses it, and gives it to the disciples to give to the crowd.

Matthew does not say that the crowd or the disciples are “astonished” or “amazed” – usual reactions in a miracle story. Matthew is telling us something else: the real miracle is that the little food Jesus and the disciples have is sufficient for everyone there. Indeed, they have more than enough. Although Jesus and the disciples are tired and have been deprived of their peace and only have enough food for themselves, still – with the blessing of God – they have sufficient resources to match the needs of the people.

Jesus and the disciples give the crowd all they can: that is Jesus’ lesson in pastoral practice. When Jesus faces the concrete needs of an expectant people, he does not see the need to send anyone away; but when he sees the brutalising power of Herod at work, he feels the need to go away himself.

We do not know how the death of John the Baptist affected Jesus, but we do know that John played a unique role in the formation of Jesus’ life. His violent death must have saddened Jesus and, by necessity, left him wondering about his own future.

From the Gospel we learn that the news of John’s death makes Jesus want to withdraw. This is an important insight about Jesus. He needs a time of peace and quiet, to gain strength from his Father to face the forces that will oppose him to death.

He is not a robot. He feels the need to withdraw, to gather his thoughts, to marshal his resources, to pray. Yet his need for peace is not overriding; it is superseded by the needs of others. We can all readily sympathise with Jesus’ need to get away.

Like the poet Petrarch, we all experience the longing “not to be crowded, pushed, put upon, trod on”. We need our time of quiet, our getaways, our holidays.

If we don’t answer that need, we can all become burned out or burned up.

And God has no need of us as burnt offerings. Like that we are no good to anyone.

We can only give what we can, and the great teaching of today’s Gospel is that even the little we give, can be more than enough.

