



Psalm 145.8-9, 14-21
Matthew 14.13-21
6th August 2017

Two examples of Humanity

Lord God – our prayer is that the written word will point us to Christ, the Living Word – so in his name we pray and for his voice we listen. Amen.

It's been quite a week in Belgium as our two countries have commemorated the hundredth anniversary of The Battle of Passchendaele.

At the Menin Gate the King of The Belgians and The Duke of Cambridge led tributes to the soldiers who endured the rain and mud of the killing fields of Flanders.

Commentators, with the benefit of a century of hindsight, reflected on the horrors of this, perhaps the most remembered episode of World War One.

Many of them spoke of Harry Patch – Britain's last surviving Tommy who died, aged 111, in 2009.

Harry Patch was ambivalent about war. He spoke of his conviction against killing and the time he ran across the line deliberately shooting the enemy sniper before him in the chest and leg, disabling rather than killing him.

Decades later Harry Patch, at 106 met Charles Cruentz, aged 107, Germany's only surviving Great War soldier. Patch describes Passchendaele as a disastrous battle. He valued his meeting with Cruentz and said they both believed in a United Europe and peace.

Some of you have told me how moved you were as you watched these commemorations from Belgium last weekend.

The Church has never responded to War with a single voice or viewpoint. Quakers took part but as stretcher bearers, Augustine gave us a Just War theory, many fighting in opposite trenches did so because the priest back home in either Berlin or Blackpool had declared God was on our side, yet thirty years later in World War Two the German Lutheran Priest Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer reluctantly becomes involved in a plot to assassinate his country's leader for the sake of world peace.

Nothing that we are doing during these centenary years of the 1st World War is a

celebration of what went on – it is rather a Commemoration. What we celebrate is the peace that followed – albeit a too short a peace that was broken in 1939.

We commemorate war – we celebrate peace.

So how does any of this connect with the Lectionary reading this morning that describes the Feeding of the 5000 – a miracle-like moment that celebrates God's remarkable generosity towards us, something so creative and uplifting that at its heart it is surely the very opposite of war.

As we approach today's well know gospel, when it looked as if all on offer was a meagre five loaves and two fish – it would be good just to take a step back and remember what has only recently been chronicled in Matthew's Gospel. For the first part of chapter 14 tells of the cruel death of Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist.

It's as if Matthew is hinting at two empires or kingdoms here. One has those elements of war – fear and conflict instigated by a paranoid leader Herod. The other is the essence of peace – generosity, kindness and sacrificial sharing – exemplified and encouraged by the Man for Others, Jesus Christ.

They are, in some ways, two opposing kingdoms and the first is Herod's.

Herod's rule seems to have been characterised by a nagging insecurity. He even becomes paranoid about John the Baptist and cunningly orchestrates his death during his daughter's party prompting her to ask for the Baptist's head to be served up on a silver salver.

This is a grotesque empire based on fear. This is a brutal kingdom in which life is held cheap by those in power.

Contrast that, Matthew seems to be saying to us this morning, with God's Empire, the Kingdom of Heaven – as demonstrated by Jesus.

As Jesus enables over five thousand to be feed this event becomes a sign of God's compassion and his call for us to be compassionate.

Warren Carter, a contemporary American bible scholar says of this Kingdom of Heaven that it has 'Life giving structures and compassionate practices' – I rather like that for a church's strap line – 'Life giving structures and compassionate practices'.

Two empires – Herod's and God's are brought together in Matthew 13 and the contrast couldn't be louder.

Regularly the bible speaks poetically of God's generosity. It becomes a motif for

the Kingdom – the idea of abundance – of all being fed, of all being free, of all experiencing life in its fullness.

That, some suggest, is the real miracle here – that folk on the margins experience God's generous character – a glimpse of life touched by him.

The all ate and were satisfied.

Well we're not actually told how it was achieved. The time line of the miracle runs like this: hungry crowd at the end of a long day, markets in nearby town closed, five loaves and two fish discovered in someone's lunch box, Jesus says a blessing over the available food, gives it to the disciples who distribute it, everyone has enough, twelve basketful of left-overs collected afterwards.

It's surely a point worth making that Jesus asks the disciples to share with him in his work of generosity. Far from being passive observers who simply brought a problem to Jesus and then stood back looking on as a miracle was performed – on this occasion they, the disciples, become an integral part of the solution.

Verse 19: Jesus broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people.

There are many, many times when I believe God calls us to participate in answering our own prayers. Active Christianity has a beating heart of compassion that gets involved in projects that promote the concept that citizens of the developing world are truly our neighbours here in the developed. We pray for our families, our communities, our churches, our workplaces, our democracy – but that isn't the end but the starting place of our concern – having committed the matter to God we then work hard as listeners, encouragers, fundraisers and peacemakers in these contexts – somehow seeking, with God's help, to make a contribution towards answering our own prayers.

Jesus gave the loaves and fish to the disciples and they then took it round to all the people.

Two empires – one Herod's, the other God's. One so full of a struggle to cling on to power the other characterised by an openhearted generosity.

But the truth is that neither empire is entirely self contained – they can both impinge on the other. God's kingdom can bless Herod's bringing restraint and redirection – but then, alas, Herod's kingdom can sometimes damage God's so that in the Church, for example, we too can be captivity by the delusion of power for its own sake.

All of us, I guess, know the challenge of these two kingdoms and the conflict they

sometimes bring to our personal and collective decision making.

Last week after attending a concert at St Martin's in The Fields I walked, as I often do by the graceful statue of Edith Cavell in St Martin's Place just opposite the National Portrait Gallery.

This Christian nurse from Norwich worked in German occupied Brussels. She was protected by the first Geneva Convention which granted security to medical personnel working behind the lines. But that protection ran out if she were to help British, French and Belgian prisoners escape to Britain, which she did.

This nurse, the daughter of a Norfolk vicarage spent her years in World War One caring for German patients as well as assisting British ones.

When it was discovered she was doing the later she was convicted by a French court of being a collaborator and sentenced to death in October 1915. The night before she died, being visited by the chaplain, she said: Patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone. Words engraved on her memorial in central London and spoken at her state funeral in Westminster Abbey, when her body was returned home after the war.

Those two empires, Herod's and God's had collided in Edith Cavell's life – and she coped with that reality by caring equally for German and British sufferers.

When such a collision comes our way, may we embrace God's generosity and do all we can to answer our own prayers – in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit. Amen.

Amersham 4th August 2017