

This is one of a series of my reflections based on the banners that are hanging in St Peters and St Paul's Church, Aylesford. There are 8 banners:

GOD Listens	GOD Enables
GOD Loves	GOD Provides
GOD Creates	GOD Encourages
GOD Cares	GOD Lives

Other banner reflections will follow but in the meantime a printed version of the series of reflections is available in the church.



GOD PROVIDES

The feeding of the five thousand is one of the most well known of all of Jesus' miracles. It is there in all the gospels. Yet there is much debate as to what really happened. In studying the event we are trying to analyse a very complex picture.

First there was the situation. Jesus lands his boat near to Bethsaida and walks into the hills with his disciples. He rests on a large grassy plain and crowds begin to join him, pilgrims, wishing to see and hear him. They are all tired and hungry. They had travelled a long way. It was a very lonely place.

Then there were the disciples. Jesus says to Philip: "How are we to buy bread so that these people may eat." Philip replies that 20 pounds would not buy enough bread for everyone to have a little. That answer wasn't much use. Andrew, on the other hand, brings a boy to Jesus who had the loaves and fishes. He had no idea what he was doing but he was actually providing the material for a miracle.

Next there was the boy. Perhaps his mother had sent him out for the day with a picnic and he had wandered along until he joined up with crowds of people soon to find himself listening to a man preaching. Everyone seemed spellbound and they were still there three hours later. The boy was still there too, with his uneaten picnic. Andrew ushered him towards Jesus. In front of the huge, hungry crowd this boy is thrust forward with five barley loaves and two small fish as if such a meagre amount could provide, in any way, for so many. Could any situation be more absurd? Reluctantly perhaps, he surrendered his picnic. Jesus took it, gave thanks as if this were a public banquet and distributed it to the famished crowds. All had sufficient and 12 baskets were collected up afterwards.

And then there is Jesus, himself. He longed for peace and quiet. He wanted to rest but was unable to do so because crowds followed him around. He felt compassion. He preaches and then wants to feed them, an implicit contrast with the attitude of the disciples. They seemed to want rid of the crowds. Yet Jesus is saying that they should be given something to eat. They are fed. Jesus takes the boy's picnic and works wonders.

After reading about the feeding of the five thousand people how do you walk away from the story? Does it bear any resemblance to reality to you? Does it have much to say to you? Do you seek an explanation that makes the event sound credible? Perhaps the people did have food with them and the miracle was in making people willing to share their possessions? Maybe it wasn't the loaves and the fishes that changed but the people themselves, becoming a fellowship of sharers.

What about the boy, though? So little I have to offer and yet so much when Christ gives it away. This picture clearly shows that Jesus needs what we bring him. It may well be that the world, or at least our little part of it, is denied miracle after miracle and triumph after triumph simply because we will not bring Jesus what we have and what we are. We may be sorry and embarrassed about what we have but this is no reason for not doing so. The boy proved this. Many tired and hungry people benefited as a result because of the power of Christ and this operated because of what the boy gave up.

And the disciples! The disciples were consulted, they organised, passed out the food, handled the crowds, collected the leftovers. Yet at the end it was fully conceded that Jesus had done it all. Isn't this the encouragement for those of us caught up in the work of God? We may be at full stretch, we may be extremely busy and feel that the demands are beyond us. That is good. That will make us depend even more upon the unseen factor that alone gives our witness its significance and power. We are all caught up in the mission of Christ and are involved as Philip, Andrew and even the boy were. Andrew brought the boy to Jesus and we will never know what possibilities we are releasing if and when we ever bring someone to Jesus. But when something is produced from virtually nothing; when results exceed all hopes and

expectations, we shall realise, as we should do from this picture of the feeding of the five thousand, that, at every step, we are witnessing God at work.

God seems to provide the finishing touches that bring meaning and definition. In John's Gospel this picture of the feeding of the five thousand is followed by Jesus' sermon on the Bread of Life. It seems that the purpose of the feeding of the people was not to satisfy the hungry crowds, right and proper as this ministry is, but rather as a sign of the real presence of God through both his power and his compassion.

God provides us with so much. Above all God provides us with the true bread from heaven. And that bread is Jesus. Walking away after reading the story of the five thousand we should be thinking big, committed to using our resources which will never be too small or insignificant (just like the boy's loaves and fishes) and eagerly waiting to take advantage of this event's humble showing of Jesus' glory.