

In 1984 Bob Geldof and a number of other pop stars of his generation released a record called 'Feed the World'. That record, 'Feed the World', raised over 8 million pounds and increased worldwide awareness of the plight of Ethiopia. Since that day, we continually see situations in our media where people are going without basic necessities like food and water, as famine and starvation hits a nation decimating millions of men, women and children.

Over the last few months, we have read in our newspapers and seen pictures on our television screens of the food crisis in the Horn of Africa. Millions of people in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia require emergency assistance. In Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, three quarters of a million people are at risk from malnutrition and one child dies every six minutes. The charity 'Save the Children' is trying to help by bringing in medical supplies and much-needed food, but it would seem that most of the world has turned its back on this part of the world.

Today is our Harvest Festival service, when we give grateful thanks to God for all that he has given to us. And it is a time when we think about trying to help those less fortunate than ourselves.

Our Gospel reading this morning from John, chapter 6, is part of a long discourse about food, in particular, bread – bread for the body and bread for the soul. At the beginning of chapter 6, we have an account of Jesus feeding 5,000 people. Loaves of bread and fishes dominate this story. Needless to say, the people are filled, not only with food, but also with excitement by this seemingly easy way to satisfy their hunger.

Jesus and his disciples then leave the crowd and go across the Sea of Galilee. But the people enthusiastically follow Jesus across the Sea of Galilee and find him at Capernaum. They are puzzled about how Jesus got there and in verse 25, question him about when he arrived, 'Rabbi, when did you come here?' Jesus immediately sees beyond the shallow motive of why the people are seeking him out. The people are interested only in food for the body. They fail to recognize that the food they received from Jesus' hands the day before represents far more than satisfying their hunger for one day. Jesus reminds them that earthly bread does not last. A loaf of bread soon moulds and decays. Although it satisfies a person's hunger for a matter of hours, hunger pangs soon return and one must eat bread again and again. Jesus tells them about food that endures for eternal life. This food he himself will give them and he is authorized to do so by God the Father. The people ask Jesus for some sign which will confirm what he says. They don't grasp the significance of the signs which Jesus has already showed them. In verse 26, he tells them, 'You are looking for me not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.'

In fact, the people see some parallel between what Jesus did with the five loaves and what Moses did when their ancestors became desperately hungry in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. In verse 31 we read, 'Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness: as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'

The people refer to manna as 'bread from heaven' but they evidently credit Moses with giving such bread to their ancestors. Jesus picks up on this phrase and takes it beyond the giving of manna and beyond the satisfying of physical hunger. He reminds his hearers of something they should already know. It was not Moses who provided the manna in the wilderness. It was God. Jesus declares to the crowd that God the Father still gives bread from heaven. In John, verse 33 it says, 'The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.' This

saying arouses the interest of the people to the extent that they ask Jesus to give them this bread always.

So, what do the people mean by 'this bread'? How do they interpret 'the bread from heaven'? Are they thinking only of an abundant supply of food which will never fail? Whatever they mean by 'give us this bread always,' their request opens the way for Jesus to tell them plainly what the bread of God which comes down from heaven is.

Implicit in what Jesus says to the crowd is the fact that if we want to be a follower of Jesus, we will have to do something. We will have to put our faith in Jesus. We have to understand that it's by this faith that we will be made full. No amount of good luck will fill us, at least not with the food we need for eternity.

There is no clearer picture in scripture of what humankind must do to be fulfilled than what we have in this morning's Gospel reading. Our lives will always be empty without the life-saving presence of Jesus. We come into a right relationship with God through Jesus. Once in that right relationship, we will begin to see that we are filled with his presence and because of that, we will be able to see the world and all of the good and bad things in our world with new clarity. More importantly we will know how vital it is that we do something about the injustice that we see around us every day.

How sad it is when we put other 'needs' ahead of this need for the Bread of Life made known in the person of Jesus Christ! Jesus is the only real need that we have to live a life of eternal blessing. Yet, we pursue all manner of expensive luxuries and in the process neglect the importance of returning thanks to the giver of all good gifts, for the only thing that really matters for eternity. It's like going into the library across the road and seeing all the books. We can look at all that knowledge, but unless we take down a book and read it, we can only guess what knowledge is contained between its pages. We literally have to take that knowledge inside ourselves in order to gain anything from it. It's the same thing with Jesus. We need to take him into our life in order to show the benefits outside of our life.

We have been blessed by God in ways too many to number, despite the economic uncertainties of our country, and yet we often feel just like the people in our text for today. We, too, want Jesus to give us one more thing. We want one more demonstration of his power. It's almost as if they, and now us, are viewing Jesus' ministry as a biblical magic show. They wanted yet another demonstration of his power so 'then they would believe.'

Maybe circumstances in our lives have left us unable to see the many wondrous things God has done and continues to do in our lives. Maybe the pain of life has overwhelmed us to the point where we don't see anymore how blest we truly are. Maybe this is a time of grieving for some because this is the first year without the person they loved. Maybe it's just that life has got away from us with the busyness that is so much a part of all of our lives. Maybe some of us are lucky enough to be in that category of people who have been so blest, that even those blessings don't look all that good anymore. It's easy to be thankful when things are good. It's easy to see the world through rose-colored glasses when our life is rosy. But, a life of true fulfillment can come to those who try to learn from their setbacks.

How, then, can we overcome our mind-set of apathy and move toward a true spirit of thanksgiving in a culture that teaches us to enter into the rat race and compete for status with a world of unthankful people. I don't pretend to have all of the answers, but I do think we need to recognize God's blessings in all of their many manifestations and give thanks to God even and most importantly when it seems impossible to do so.

As we look around us at the land of plenty that we live in, it is my prayer that we will see through new eyes each day the ways that God has blest us and never take God or those blessings for granted. When we internalize those blessings, we will be happy to share with others throughout the world. As many of you will be aware, the Biggin Hill Romania Group run an annual Christmas shoe box appeal and it is today, as part of our Harvest Festival service, that we bring and give lovely gift wrapped boxes filled with presents for this appeal and remember and give thanks to God for all he has given to us. These gift boxes will be distributed later in the year to schools, hospitals and churches in Comanesti and will help to bring some joy and happiness to children and young people less fortunate than ourselves in Romania. Thank you for your generous gifts that you have brought along today.

Amen

25 September 2011 Harvest Festival Service : John 6-vs 25-35