

From this week's Epistle, from the Letter of St. Paul the Apostle to the Romans: ... *you were set free from sin and have become servants of righteousness.* Romans 6:18

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I'd like to talk to you about something very dear to my heart: banana bread. Yup. Banana bread. I very much like banana bread. Maybe you do too. But when the girls were growing up, they didn't particularly like it. So, whenever Janice made some, it would always fall to me to finish it. Which, surprising as this may seem, especially to those of us who enjoy banana bread, could sometimes be a chore. Because, you may not know this, banana bread does something that virtually no other food is able to do. It really is a kind of miracle food. During the night, when no one is around to watch, banana bread magically grows back. Yup. It's magic. So that, try as you might, you can never really finish it. It seems that there's always just as much left the next day as there was before, no matter how much you ate the day before. When the girls were young I'd always try my best. But no matter how hard I tried, there was always just as much left the next day.

Surprisingly, we never had the same problem whenever Janice made brownies or chocolate chip cookies or something that the girls liked. They'd all be gone almost as soon as they were made; in fact, there may have been more than a few battles between the girls and me about who would get the very last one. But never ever a battle for banana bread. No matter how much I ate; no matter how hard I tried, it seemed that there was always as much left as there had been when I started.

One of the saddest things about humanity is our willingness to treat life like it's a brownie or a chocolate chip cookie. Something to be coveted; something that we must ration carefully; something to be fought over. The assumption is that we only have so much of everything: so much time; so much attention; so much interest; so much money; so much care and concern and love. And we assume that, if everything is, as we imagine, finite, we have to keep a firm grip on whatever we have.

Humanity has fought from the beginning of our existence over land and water and food and wealth and power and any of the countless other things that we measure and control; and if someone has something that I don't have, or more of what I do have, then I assume that I'm perfectly free to use whatever force I can to get it; and they assume that they best use whatever force they can to keep it.

We see a hint of that long sad story of human brokenness in this week's Old Testament lesson. We see a hint of that in the words of that tired, poor, hungry widow; that Gentile; that outsider; who has made the decision to gather a few sticks of wood that she might make a small fire; that she might take the last handful of flour that she has in her jar and the little bit of oil that she has her jug and make a small bit of bread; that she and her son might have one last little bit of a meal before they die.

We see the image of a world of deeply challenging limitations; that everyday world where so much of humanity lives even this very day, both those who have too little and those who have too much; a world where people starve every day not because there's not enough to eat but because what we have is not shared as it need

to be with compassion and generosity; a world where people starve not just for food but for love and forgiveness, not because there is not enough love and forgiveness but because we choose to hoard God's infinite mercy and compassion to our hearts.

We see, as I said, a hint of that kind of world in this week's Old Testament lesson; but we do not see in her response to Elijah's request for some of that bread any of the grabbing and clutching that makes the world such an inhospitable place. We see nothing in her response of the fear that clutches our possession close and closes human hearts to our neighbours. We see, instead, generosity: a generosity that willingly shares what little bit she has. And, above all, we see trust and faith: faith that the word of the prophet would be true; faith that God's promise that the 'jar of flour [would] not be spent, and the jug of oil [would] not be empty' would come to pass.

And we see something of that same generosity in this week's Gospel, where that crowd of Gentiles¹, that crowd of outsiders, much like that poor widow, have faithfully followed Jesus for three days; and would faint with hunger if they were to be sent home; a crowd where someone who is just as hungry as everyone else in that huge gathering chooses not to behave as humanity so often chooses to behave – by clutching the little bit of food that they have to themselves – but instead chooses to share those few loaves of bread and that bit of fish with others. An act of generosity which God blesses with abundance, just as he once blessed with abundance the generosity of that poor widow.

In this week's Epistle St. Paul writes much about how those who live in Christ have been 'set free from sin'; maybe, in the images of this week's Old Testament lesson and this week's Gospel, [maybe] set free from that continual human instinct to live in fear; desperately might need them. Perhaps that's the sin that we ought to have in mind this week: the hardness of heart that refuses to bless others with the very same gifts with which God has blessed us. And the great sadness is that it doesn't have to be this way; because Grace is much like banana bread: it never runs out, no matter how hard we try; no matter how much we give it away. There is no limit. It only grows if we share it. Because it seems that one of the lessons that we might learn this day, one of the lessons that we might learn from the long sad story of human division and conflict and brokenness, is simply this: if all we ever try to do is fearfully grasp all the things that we have, all the blessing of God's great life, all that we claim to own, we'll likely discover in the end that, all along, they've been owning us.²

¹ This morning's Gospel may feel a bit like déjà vu all over again; because we hear that other story, the story about Jesus feeding the five thousand, every year on Mothering Sunday – the Fourth Sunday in Lent. And while some argue that these two stories are the same story remembered in different ways, there's lots of good evidence to suggest that Mark was perfectly clear that these are two separate stories set in two different contexts. Besides the obvious differences in numbers: in the number of people – five thousand at the first event and four thousand at the second; and the number of loaves of bread – five in the first and seven in the second; and the numbers of full baskets left over after all had eaten – twelve the first time and seven the second time, perhaps the most important difference is found in where these two events take place. The story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand is firmly situated in Jewish territory, just on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. It's a story firmly set within the history of the People of God: where Jesus sees the crowd which is following him in Old Testament terms; as 'sheep without a shepherd', as he calls them; and where he stands in the role of Moses feeding the People of God with bread from heaven; just as God once fed his people with manna from heaven in the wilderness. But this morning's account of the feeding of the Four Thousand lacks these Jewish details; this Jewish context; and Mark tells us that many of those following Jesus had come "from a distance;" a phrase which is used elsewhere in Holy Scripture to speak of Gentile foreigners coming to Israel. And the fact is, this story happens in Gentile territory; on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee; in the area known as the Decapolis. So perhaps this week's Gospel is not just a retelling of the better-known story of that day when Christ fed the five thousand with five loaves of bread and a few small fish, but another story; a story that completes the image of Christ as the bread of life; in this case, the bread which feeds the Gentiles in their own wilderness, just as he had previously fed the People of Israel.

² Romans 6:18: ...you were set free from sin, and have become servants of righteousness.