

## 17<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

“Who’s your favourite character in the Bible?” It was hardly what the priest had anticipated when he invited the children to put questions to him. But since they’d asked, he’d have to try and answer. “Well”, he said, “I can tell you one of my favourite biblical characters, at any rate. I was reading about him only recently. And I doubt if you’d ever guess who he is. He’s not a patriarch or a prophet, not a king or an apostle. He’s just a little boy lost in a crowd – small, insignificant. I don’t even know his name, but he was the key figure in one of Our Lord’s greatest miracles.” And the priest went on to tell the story we’ve just been listening to in today’s Gospel.

It’s easily pictured. A huge crowd milling about Jesus. The apostles on edge because it’s late and the Master’s talking of providing food for them all; and they know that even six months’ wages wouldn’t cover the cost. Andrew – is he trying to be smart ? – says, “There is a small boy here with five barley loaves and two fish.” Surprisingly, Jesus doesn’t shake his head in disappointment. Instead, he tells the apostles to get the people to sit down on the grass – it’s springtime – while he goes to have a word with the boy. It would be marvelous to eavesdrop on what Jesus actually says to him. It’s never easy to part a young lad from his lunch. But that’s what happens and before long the vast crowd are being fed on what were originally a few loaves and fish, and there’s plenty of food left over at the end. The crowd are so amazed they’re all for making Jesus a king. Not wanting the apostles to get involved, he sends them off across the lake while he, after dispersing the crowd, goes up into the hills to be with his Father in prayer. What a story that little boy had to tell his family when he got home that night !

And what a challenge he holds for us. We’re so easily paralysed into doing nothing by the sheer scale of problems. I hear of hunger in Africa and wonder how my few dollars could make any difference. Nearer home I’m slow to do small things, because they are so small – like offering a word of sympathy or a helping hand – though they might mean so much to others. The boy in the Gospel reminds me of the story of another little boy who was walking along the seashore, throwing back into the sea the jellyfish stranded on the beach. An old chap asked what he was doing. “I’m saving these fish,” he replied. “Saving them?” said the old man. “But there are thousands of them, millions of them. What you’re doing can’t make any difference !” The little lad said nothing, but as he heaved another jellyfish towards the waters, he murmured, “It’s going to make a

heck of a difference to this one.” If only we were prepared to do the little that’s in our power – and leave the rest to the Lord.

Just as we underestimate the value of our small actions, so we underestimate ourselves because we’re such small, ordinary people. Like the woman who, after hearing her parish priest’s talk of his plans for the coming week, remarked “A priest’s work is like a woman’s – never done.” But then she added, “Mind you, yours is God’s work.” Of course, the truth is that if we’re doing what God calls us to do, leading a life worthy of our vocation, as Paul puts it, then it doesn’t matter how insignificant or earthy it seems to be, it’s just as much God’s work as is the priest’s celebration of the Mass or any of his activity.

However small we are and however meager our resources, we’re all vital to Jesus and his plans, just like the little lad in the Gospel. Jesus doesn’t simply tell us these things through today’s Gospel, he shows them by what he does at this Mass and at every Mass. He speaks to us through the words of the scriptures and he takes a little bread and wine; and then he does something infinitely more wonderful than multiplying them – he changes them into his body and blood so that he can draw us into his embrace in Holy Communion. If that doesn’t show that we’re special – really special - to Jesus, then nothing ever could.