

Views from the Pews

The power of a small gift in the right hands

“Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?” (John 6:9)

The fame of Jesus was spreading like wildfire, and attracted huge crowds. No one had performed wondrous miracles like this man, and no one had spoken with authority like he did (Mark 1:22). People everywhere wanted to be with him, to find physical or spiritual healing, or to join the general excitement. The crowds followed him even when he moved off to the other side of the lake in search of quiet time with his disciples. Jesus saw that the people were hungry, but also that they needed more than a one-off meal. They were spiritually starving to death.

Jesus turned to Philip and asked, "Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?" Phillip protested that two hundred denarii [one denarius was worth a day's labour, roughly US\$50] could not buy enough to feed them all, even if they could find that money and a shop in the wilderness. Philip's estimate emphasises the huge size of the crowd, hence it would take an *enormous* sum of money to feed them all. Meanwhile, Andrew introduced to Jesus a small boy who was willing to give up his own little meal, and Jesus did with it what only the Son of God could do.

John describes the scene in wonderfully convincing and surprising detail. Does it matter whether or not his story describes a literal event? Among those who cannot believe it at face value, some see it as an enacted parable. Others prefer the idea that the boy's example inspired others in the crowd to share their own supplies.

Either way, it has produced a rich vein of spiritual teaching about selfless offering that resonates down the centuries, still valid whether the story is literal or metaphorical. A mother made the bread, and gave it and the fish to her son. The son gave them to the disciples, the disciples gave them to Jesus. The mother received almost nothing in return, except the knowledge that God had used her small offering to bless thousands. The story illustrates how, in Jesus' hands, any of the little things we do in our lives are indeed an offering to God.

Kim King, with thanks to Paul Tripp and Sheena Gershom