

5th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, Year B Responsibility: Canon Barlow 5th July, 2009

"Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me: My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made 'perfect in weakness.'" (2 Cor. 12:7-9)

In St. Paul's day there were no chemist shops dispensing relief for on-going aches and pains - no Aspros or aspirin, no panadeine no paracetamol - nothing like those convenient pain-killers we turn to and take for granted. And because we have the availability of our painkillers we become intolerant of pain and get quite niggledly when pain occurs. Even when the pain becomes agony and hospital treatment is necessary, there are still heavy drugs and anaesthetics to relieve us. Added to our physical aches and pains and discomforts are our personal feelings of inadequacy and insecurity. Under such circumstances it is often difficult to look on the bright side: to be positive, confident and optimistic.

As we heard in the Second Reading, the great missionary apostle Paul suffered from some painful ailment which he referred to as his "thorn in the flesh." There is plenty of evidence to show that pain was no stranger to Paul. In the preceding chapter, Paul lists something of his suffering as a result of his missionary endeavours. "I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was ship-wrecked; I spent a day and a night in the open sea." He wasn't boasting, merely stating that if anyone did boast about suffering for the Lord's sake, he could top that.

In addition he had this "thorn in the flesh". No-one really knows just what it was. Some have speculated that it was a form of recurring malaria which caused serious head-aches. Some have speculated that it was a form of epilepsy: this is based on his account of his conversion experience, when he was temporarily struck blind and fell from his horse. Others think it could have been some painful eye trouble, for in his letter to the Galatians he wrote: "I can testify that if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me."(Gal.4:15)

St. Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles as a sequel to his Gospel. He was a doctor of medicine - in the Epistle to the Colossians, Paul refers to him as "Luke the beloved physician" or "our dear friend Luke, the doctor." (Col.4:14) In writing about Paul and his travels Luke uses the pronoun "they", up to chapter 15 - "they" did this; "they" went there. But in chapter 16, without warning or comment, the pronoun changes to "we", suggesting that Luke had joined Paul and went on with him, ultimately to Rome. It seems that Paul's "thorn in the flesh" was bad enough for him to appreciate the company of a doctor.

The origin of pain can present a real spiritual problem. There are those who say it has come as a punishment for sin. And certainly sin can bring physical and mental pain as a result. Some say it is sent by God, to try us, and certainly pain does try our patience, and our faith in a merciful and loving God. Some say pain comes from Satan because its nature is devilish and contrary to the will of God.

Paul wrote to say that he saw his keeping him from becoming conceited, preventing him from becoming proud, arrogant, and self-sufficient, as could easily happen to a man of his abilities and talents. He wrote of it as a messenger from Satan, to torment him.

Pain and suffering come neither from God, who is perfect love - for that would be against His nature, - nor from Satan, who does not have that kind of power. But if we allow Satan to influence us and our activities, then we can bring pain on ourselves, and others.

Pain and suffering come because we are part of God's creation which has gone astray from His Way. Sometimes it happens because of the actions of ourselves and others; or by the result of neglect by ourselves and others; or by the misuse of God's gifts by ourselves and others; or even through inheritance. We live in a spoiled creation, and often the innocent suffer with the guilty.

Satan uses pain to create doubt and depression in the minds of sufferers concerning the goodness and the character and the behaviour of God. Satan seeks to foster bitterness and hatred through pain. If Satan can cause us to be angry with our fellowmen and God, and to react with bitterness and hostility towards them, he is leading us down the path of destruction. St. Peter warned in his first Epistle: "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith." (1 Peter 5:8,9)

Paul was a man of great faith and prayer. He believed in taking every problem to God for help and guidance and solution. Three times he prayed, indeed he pleaded with the Lord, for relief from the agony of his thorn. One would think that if anybody would be healed through faithful prayer, Paul would! But no.

Our Lord prayed three times for the removal of the cup of suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane as He faced the agony of crucifixion on the following day. The Scriptures say that angels came and ministered to Him, but the cup was not removed. The remarkable, incredible message of the suffering Christ is that God chooses to act within human weakness. The work that God does, and the power that it has, is best shown through weak and feeble instruments. Haven't you ever gone to visit a suffering friend and come away feeling that they have ministered to you?

Paul's persistent prayer for the removal of his thorn was not granted. Instead, God gave him strength to bear it. God does not spare us from bad experiences, but rather makes us able to conquer them.

What are we to do then when we pray for relief from pain that plagues us, and seemingly, there is no answer? We cannot just ignore the pain; it is real, it is not illusion. Let's look at Paul's programme for the management of his pain - and maybe we can apply the principles to ourselves.

Firstly he sought the aid of a physician; he had Luke with him as a travelling partner. Then, he accepted pain as something that was permitted by the will of God, even when he could not understand it. The more Paul becomes aware of the weakness of his human nature, the more strength he finds in the power of Christ. "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Paul offered thanksgiving to God in the midst of his suffering and pain. This doesn't mean that he always thanked God for his sufferings, but in the midst of it he looked for something to be glad and thankful

about. In writing to the Thessalonian believers he wrote: "Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1 Thess.5.:16-18) To search for something to be thankful for in a time of pain, creates a positive way of thinking, and an open mind and heart through which God can minister to us in our time of need.

Paul made the most and the best of each day. He tried not let yesterday distress him today, nor to worry too much about tomorrow He did not let bitterness take him over even when he was unjustly treated. When we stop asking for sympathy because of our bad situation or hard treatment, then we may come to see these things as the channel through which God is working.

Somewhere along the line we have accepted the false impression that if you do good and try to do right, God will give you an exemption from pain, trouble and suffering. This is unrealistic. This is unbiblical. This is contrary to the experience of the saints. Or yours!

Jesus came to help people cope with pain. He healed the sic He gave sight to the blind. He gave hearing to the deaf. He enabled the lame to walk. With faith in His love and compassion, He enables us to face and cope with pain. We can be assured that the blessing of God rest upon those who seek to relieve pain and suffering - the doctors, the surgeons, the physicians, the nurses, the therapists, the psychologists - and we should seek their services.

Jesus came also to help us cope with the pain of being fallen creatures, mistake-makers, sinners who are astray from God and fin difficulty in getting back. Jesus came to help us cope with our incompleteness and our spiritual blindness. Jesus came to help us avoid the pain of missing heaven when this mortal life is over. He suffered pain, and died, and conquered death in order that He might prepare for us a place with Him in heaven.

The Lord said to Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." His grace is sufficient for us **AMEN**

PENTECOST 6, Year B Sunday between 10th & 16th July-. 12th July, 2009

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

In the Church's Calendar there is a day designated for the commemoration of the Beheading of John the Baptist: August 29th. But it is a minor day, with no collect or readings appointed. So we have that narrative included in the ordinary run of Sunday Gospel Readings: today. There is a major Festival Day, June 24th, appointed for the commemoration of his birth, but being usually a week day, that tends to slip by almost unnoticed, too. So today let us refresh our memories about this man of whom Jesus said: "I tell you, among those born of women there is no-one greater than John." (Luke 7:28)

In the course of Sunday Readings we hear of John the Baptist firstly in the Season of Advent, where he appears on the scene warning of the imminent coming of the Messiah, and calling people to repentance in preparation. Then for a Sunday or two after Christmas he appears again, when he baptizes Jesus, and refers to Him as the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.

There was a priest named Zechariah whose wife Elizabeth was a cousin of the Blessed Virgin Mary. They had no children - Elizabeth was barren and both she and Zechariah were advanced in years, according to Luke who being a doctor was the only writer of a Gospel interested in such details. Six months before the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, on the occasion we know as the Annunciation, he appeared to Zechariah and told him that his prayer had been heard and that Elizabeth would have a son whose name was to be John. "You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord, and he shall drink no wine nor strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared." (Luke 1:14-17) Zechariah was so incredulous that he was literally struck dumb for his disbelief, until the child was born, when he burst into that song we know as the canticle, the Benedictus: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people..." and so on.

John then drops out of sight for nearly 30 years. Luke simply records: "And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel". Matthew, Mark and John all join Luke in describing John coming in from the desert to proclaim the coming of the Messiah. Luke goes to some trouble to pin the time down accurately: "In the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar - when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrach of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrach of Iturea and Traconitus, and Lysanias tetrach of Abilene - during the High Priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas." (Luke 3:12,) In other words, about AD 27.

John was a real mystic, a throwback to the prophets who used to proclaim God's word and will to the Hebrew people many years previously. His appearance must have been quite alarming as he went about in his rough garment of camel's hair and with wild uncut hair and beard. Add to this fierce flashing eyes and a nature unafraid of anything or anyone, and we have the picture of a most uncomfortable and uncompromising man to be with. He was prepared to face anyone with their sins and call them to repentance, whatever their station in life, even the king. He was called to be the forerunner of Christ - more than just an

advance publicity officer, for he called the people to be ready for the coming of the Messiah. Again quoting Luke: "The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all: 'I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.' And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them." (Luke 3:15-18) Those who accepted his teaching he baptized in the River Jordan to signify that their sins were washed away.

Then Jesus came down from Galilee to be baptized by John. John was taken aback, because he knew that Jesus had no sins to wash away, and that his own work was simply a preparation for what Jesus was going to do. "I need to be baptized by you," he said, "and do you come to me?" John was right in raising his objection - his baptism signified the washing away of sin - it was for those who were prepared to confess their sins, turn away from them, and receive God's forgiveness, But the sinless Christ had nothing of which to repent. Why then did Jesus insist? The answer is this: in submitting to John's baptism, Jesus was taking His stand by the side of the sinners He came to save. At the River Jordan, as later on at Calvary, Jesus was "numbered with the transgressors" in accordance with the prophecy of Isaiah (53:12).

Soon afterwards John was arrested and thrown into prison. He had had the temerity to criticize Herod the tetrach for taking Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. Incidentally this was not the Herod of the time of Jesus' birth who ordered the slaughter of the Innocents, but his son. From prison John was able to follow Jesus' ministry, and sent messengers to ask Him questions. Jesus was not the sort of Messiah John and most people were expecting, and perhaps John began to doubt his own vision of Jesus as the Messiah. Probably, like so many others, John expected the Messiah to be far more aggressive and militant, setting about restoring the nation to its former glory as in the days of the great King David. He sent two of his disciples to ask: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Luke 7:20) Jesus could understand how such doubts could arise. He took the men with Him while He taught and healed, and then sent them back, saying: "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. -Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." To the crowd Jesus said about John: "This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'..... If you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come." (Matt.11:10-14)

In today's language, Jesus might have said: "You can't win with some people! John came neither eating nor drinking and they say 'He has a demon'. The Son of Man came, eating and drinking, and they say 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners'." Is that not true still today? The Church tries very hard to be open and welcoming to all - but you can't please everyone. All we can do is make people feel warm and wanted, and then if they don't want to join us we must recognise that it is their decision and their responsibility. There is no point in altering our tradition and standards to try to suit

everyone just in case they might come more often. They might not too, and do we then alter things to suit the next comer? We must take care to also remember the faithful regulars!

So we come at last to today's Gospel reading. Herodias, Herod's brother Philip's ex-wife, had been nursing her grudge against John ever since he publicly rebuked them for adultery. Why John made such a big issue of that is not clear. Certainly in the old book of law, Leviticus lays down that it is a no-no to have sexual relations with a brother's wife: the reason given is that it would dishonour the brother! (Lev.18:16) If a man marries his brother's wife, it is an act of impurity: he has dishonoured his brother! (Lev.20:21). But in the book Deuteronomy, chapter 25, it is O.K. for a man to marry his brother's widow. So it is not an incestuous matter. It is no restriction in the modern Marriage Act either. But it seems that Philip was alive and Herod just took his wife from him - Herodias apparently went willingly. And that seems to be John's point of criticism. Whatever the reason, Herodias did not forget the criticism and when Herod became so carried away with Herodias' daughter Salome's dancing that he promised her anything she wished, her mother put her up to asking for John's head on a dish. It was given to her.

The message for us in all this is summed up in the- Collect for St. John the Baptist's Day: "Make us so to follow his teaching and holy life, that we may truly repent; and following his example, may constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake." **Amen**

Sunday between 17 & 23 July PENTECOST 7, Year B 19th July, 2009

Responsibility: Canon Barlow

"Jesus had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd." (Mark 6:34)

Leadership is of vital importance, whether it be in government, in the army, in a business organisation - or in the Church. But a wise leader does not try to do everything himself. A Prime Minister or a Premier appoints Ministers to preside over various aspects of government, and they appoint their assistants. A general is at the top of a hierarchy of colonels, majors, captains, etc each with specific responsibilities. In a complex firm, responsibility is shared for various departments, each with a departmental manager, under the overall direction of the Managing Director. And of course in the Church the pastoral and spiritual care of the Good Shepherd's flock is delegated through the bishops to the clergy, with management responsibilities delegated to another strata of officials not necessarily in Holy Orders: Registrars, Archdeacons and the like, assisted and advised by Councils and Committees.

Jesus recognised this. In the beginning of His ministry He built up a team of men who would take over His teaching and pastoral work as the growth of the new Church made the work-load too great for one man - even one such as Jesus.' So after an initial period of learning and experience, the Twelve - the first-called disciples - were sent off two by two on a training run. On their return they could see how impossible it was for Jesus to go it alone. "So many people were coming and going that they had no leisure even to eat." (Mk.6:31)

For many centuries, our Anglican branch of the Christian Faith has depended upon the Bishop being the Chief Minister, delegating local leadership to clergy situated in every community. In closely populated areas this has worked very well, although the tendency to leave it all to the Rector or Vicar - "because that's what we pay him for" - meant that most people did not recognise their own responsibility in ministry. And some clergy liked it that way, enjoying the sense of authority and power. As populations became more and more intense, so the workload of the priest increased, and where finances could not run to the employment of assistant clergy, much of the traditional pastoral care began to be more and more neglected. There just was not time to drop in on a parishioner for a chat, or to visit every bed in the hospital as a matter of routine.

In the country the situation was compounded by the financial need of a Parish having to be made up of several townships, adding travelling time to the priest's schedule, and cost to the Parish's budget.

This is where we were in this Diocese until recently. To cope with the problem of supplying ministry to scattered, diminishing centres, the somewhat daring but forward-looking vision of Ministry Districts is being implemented as we all know. Basically this involves leadership, as well as priestly ministry, being offered by a clergyman to a larger number of congregations than is usual in a traditional Parish, and relying heavily on more participation in local ministry by lay people than has been customary. It is fair to say that the response to the challenge by so many lay people in so many congregations makes a decisive land-mark in the life of the Church. Perhaps even a turning-point in our Church's tradition, with each congregation responsible for its own life and ministry.

Behind all this new thinking is the recognition that each member of a congregation has a ministry which is an integral part of the ministry of the whole congregation. We are all familiar with the ministry of a priest. Everybody knows what he, or she, is supposed to be doing and has an opinion about whether that work is being done properly! Naturally we get a bit critical if the priest's vision of the work is not exactly the same as ours. And sometimes people get so upset about that divergence of opinion that they even stop worshipping God which is tragically silly.

We do not always recognise that the congregation itself has a ministry: it should be ministering to the wide variety of people within it. And as the congregation is made up of the people within it, it follows that each member of the congregation has a ministry to every other member of the congregation. In the past the ministry of the laity has tended to be thought of in terms of some kind of vague undefined outreach to the unchurched. Or perhaps in such things as polishing the brass, running street stalls, and passing and filling the collection plate. All very necessary of course, but not really what ministry of the laity means.

On the other hand lay ministry means much more than doing parts of the Sunday services.

We have a ministry to each other. Never mind the outreach for now - people will be attracted here as they see our concern for, and support of each other. And the chores will be taken care of as worshippers desire to worship Almighty God in a place of beauty, and to express their devotion in material as well as spiritual ways.

So what is this ministry which we share? Ministry means person to person concern. There is no such thing as an impersonal ministry. It is always people-centred, or rather, God-with-people centred. If that vision is not held, then all the programmes and projects we produce in the congregation become merely busyness, do-ism.

There are certain basic attitudes to be worked at and cultivated in our ministry to one another: gentleness and acceptance for instance - giving people room to be themselves, and accepting them for what they are. And empathy - much deeper than sympathy. Putting yourself in their shoes, seeing things through their eyes. And sharing - a sharing of the problems and the worries. Letting others in behind the defensive wall of self-sufficiency - a wall we maintain in case we are really not quite as perfect as we would want people to think. There is risk in this! It means trust, and trust makes us vulnerable, and we might get hurt. But the risk is worth it if the cause is for Christ's sake. What we do and what we say must be based on the desire to create a situation which makes our congregation a place where everyone can find space to be themselves. A place to feel safe, secure, loved. A place to be heard when we feel we have something to offer. A place where one can give his or her life to God and not be laughed at or ridiculed. There are not many places like that in our society. The ministry of Jesus in which we share, is the opposite to that of our society, which functions on the basis of "might is right" and financial considerations come before supplying the needy with help. Jesus showed that spiritual strength lies not in worldly power, but in weakness and brokenness. "Unless you become like little children... Trusting, innocent, dependent upon God. That is why we need one another: not to impress each other with our strength or possessions, but to share our very real littleness, weakness, brokenness. Jesus did not beg someone to come to Him and pull out the nails as He

hung there on the cross; to help Him down from that excruciating pain and humiliation. He didn't look for somebody to explain the evil that had put Him there. What He was most grateful for was the presence of those who had been with Him along the way. Haven't you experienced the support of a friend who is just there in your time of grief or distress, when you needed the comfort of human caring and love?

We continue to need the leadership of Jesus our Good Shepherd. We continue to need the leadership of the bishop and clergy, vital to the cohesiveness and support and management of the Church.

We also need to hold to the vision that "We are the Body of Christ", that vision wonderfully expressed in the closing verses of the second Reading this morning: we are "citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God." (Eph.2:19-22) **AMEN**

Sunday between 24th and 30th July Responsibility: Canon Barlow

On 28th July, 1915, the Right Reverend Gilbert White, Bishop of Carpentaria since 1900 when that Diocese was founded, was enthroned in the Church of St. Paul (now the Cathedral Church of SS. Peter and Paul), Port Pirie, by the then Bishop of Adelaide, the Right Reverend Arthur Nutter Thomas. At the Enthronement Eucharist the newly enthroned Bishop preached his sermon using the text "Except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved." (Acts 27:31) It was a plea for unity in the Church and in the world. The Bishop lamented extremists in churchmanship as disturbing the Church's peace and called for greater action in charity and understanding. The Church must show the nations of a warring world how to achieve unity and peace among people. The world at that time was of course in the midst of World War I.

Today on the Sunday nearest to 28th July, we should be giving thanks and praying for our Diocese, remembering the bishops, clergy, and people, past and present, who have supported and maintained this part of the Church for so many years.

Its shape was very different from what it is today: originally the Diocese consisted of the area roughly east of Lake Torrens and the eastern side of Spencer Gulf down to about Port Broughton, and north of a line from there to the New South Wales border. And north also of a line going from the tip of Lake Torrens west to the Western Australia border. It consisted of ten parishes: Port Pirie, Port Augusta, Jamestown, Peterborough, Quorn, Orroroo, Crystal Brook, Melrose, Gladstone and the Leigh Creek Mission. In addition, another area - Eyre Peninsula - was placed under the episcopal charge of the Bishop of Willochra until such time as the Diocese of Adelaide wanted it back! That happened in 1956 as Bishop Brian Robin was winding up his term as Bishop of Adelaide, and when the administration of this Diocese left something to be desired.

That threw the financial viability of the Diocese into doubt. But also clergymen on Eyre Peninsula felt very much cut off from their bishop, Church Office, and the rest of the Diocese of Adelaide. So moves and negotiations began towards a transfer of territory, and on April 1st, 1967, the Rural Deaneries of Eyre Peninsula, Yorke Peninsula, and Clare were ceded to the Diocese of Willochra from the Diocese of Adelaide. Our bishop then was the Right Reverend Tom Jones - a shrewd negotiator. The Bishop of Adelaide was the Right Reverend Thomas Thornton Reed.

Ours has always been a difficult Diocese to administer, to keep financially viable, and to staff. Although modern transport and communication have brought us much closer together, yet modern agricultural methods and the financial pressures on people on the land have created a great diminution of population in country towns. This has forced rearrangements to towns grouped to make up financially viable Parishes. It has forced the closure of many small churches: Redhill, Port Germein., Caltowie, Murraytown, Lipson, Carrieton, Brinkworth - to name just a few, and there are more. To try to stem the tide two and even three Parishes were combined to form one viable entity. This in turn required more travelling for a clergyman, higher travelling costs for the Parish, and less personal contact between priest and people. As you are aware we are well into the next stage of the battle to provide ministry to small and scattered congregations. The creation of Ministry Districts with the greater involvement of lay men and women in

ministry, and the ordination of Local Clergy for the sacramental ministry, is a strategy which augers well for the future of our Diocese.

It is a fascinating Diocese of which we are part, with a wide range of situations in which the ministry of the Gospel is being conducted. But it does cost money to run. And that has to come from people who usually have a pretty big load in keeping their own Parish and local congregation afloat.

"One of Jesus' disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him: 'There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?'" (John 6:9) It is coincidental that the Gospel for today is the story of the miraculous feeding of the 5000. It is a happy coincidence because surely God has been miraculously feeding - supporting - this Diocese over the whole of its 91 years. Probably in each of those 91 years there was the lurking fear that the Diocese - or even our own Parish would go bust! We've never had sufficient funds to do all that has been needed. Yet somehow we have coped; done what was necessary to be done; made ends meet.

In today's Gospel story there are three particular characters - apart from Jesus - whose counterparts are in every parish and congregation. There was Philip with his pessimism. When Jesus asked Him where food could be purchased for the crowd Philip gloomily said that it would take a considerable sum of money to buy enough bread just to give everyone a taste. He despaired at the enormous problem. There was the optimism of Andrew, contrasting with Philip's pessimism - although he wasn't all that confident. But he brought forward the youngster with his lunch which his Mum had made for him for his day out. Ant by bringing the boy forward Andrew made the miracle possible. He couldn't have foreseen what use Jesus could have made of those-few loaves and fish, but he produced them nevertheless. There was the lad himself, without much to offer but he offered it all the same, and Jesus was able to perform the miracle.

That really is still the same solution today for the needs of our Church - the local congregation, the Ministry District, the Parish, the Diocese, the Mission Field. We might consider that we haven't much to offer; we might be apologetic about and even embarrassed by the smallness of what we can give. That is no reason for failing to bring what we can, and what we are. Offered generously and with a glad heart God can and does use it. "And the Lord loveth a cheerful giver" as Paul told the Corinthian Christians. (2 Cor.9:7)

Some people stumble at the idea of Jesus literally multiplying the loaves and fish, sufficient to feed 5000 people, since this is an impossibility in ordinary experience. We can regard this as a straight-out miracle, inexplicable any other way. It may be that this is a sacramental illustration, since John in this part of his Gospel goes on to quote Jesus declaring: "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry." (6:35) And after argument by the Jews He said "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."!(6:51)

Or it might be simply that when people saw the lad produce his little offering, they produced and:shared their own which they'd kept hidden in case the people alongside didn't have anything, and they selfishly didn't want to share. Miracle enough that Jesus can turn a selfish crowd into generous givers!

A potent message is there, whichever explanation you prefer.

And there was plenty left over. The needs of this congregation, of this Ministry District or Parish, of this Diocese, of our missionary outreach, will be amply met as those of Christ offer back to Him generously and benefits with which He has blessed us.

Let us today give thanks to God for the bishops, clergy and people who have worked and worshipped in this Diocese over the past 91 years. We pray for its future, that the Good News of the love of God for all mankind may continue to be preached and lived in this part of His Kingdom. We know that as we give of ourselves and abundance, that there will be ample and to spare for the continuance and increase of that work. **Amen**