

Sermon Preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity on Sunday August 3rd 2008
by the Reverend Alan Neale
“Do Not Dismiss Them”

Matthew 14:16 “Jesus said, ‘They need not go away’” or as the Message reads, vividly as ever, “Jesus said, ‘There is no need to dismiss them’”.

Yesterday at a dining establishment (well, more of a pub actually) not many blocks from here, I talked with one of the staff... very clearly from the Emerald Isle as was indicated by her accent.

The conversation turned to dishes peculiar to Ireland and England and then she asked, “Well, have you ever had ‘bubble and squeak’?”. My answer was immediate and definitive, “No”.

As soon as I was back home I googled the phrase and discovered that “bubble and squeak” is traditionally a meal made from cold vegetables left over from the previous day, generally the Sunday roast. And I was told “there are few references to the meal in American literature or media... it did not spread to much of the British Empire either... possibly because of unsuitable climates for roast dinners or, more likely, they simply didn’t like it!”. But, and this is the final comment I promise, there are similar dishes in Ireland, Sweden, Denmark and Scotland where it has the memorable title of “rumbledethumps”.

But whether this questionable delicacy is popular or not, it clearly shows a desire to throw nothing away, to keep whatever is possible and then to use it well.

And is not this the same dynamic, the same motivation, the same concern evidenced in the Gospel for today.

The disciples, bless them, see only the late hour and the enormous crowds and suggest this solution to Jesus, “Send the crowds away; dismiss them”.

The disciples, bless them, observe the magnificent miracle of the five loaves and two fish providing food for five thousand men (“besides women and children”)... they surely could well be forgiven, understood, for not caring too much about clean-up and collection but then, perhaps instructed by Jesus, they spend time (no miraculous help here, just simple hard and dedicated labour) spend time collecting and gathering the leftovers – surely used another time to feed another needy, hungry crowd!

By the way, all this is no chronic, debilitating symptom of compulsive hoarding... this is nothing like the rather sad digital pack rat who downloads any file he encounters and saves it to any storage device and subsequently never deletes them (though doubtless forgets them). No, this is saving, this is rescuing for a purpose... to be used, and to be used well!

It seems to be in the mind of Jesus, in the heart of God... it seems to be central to his ministry of love and rescue, his ministry of acceptance and affirmation, that nothing, no-one is expendable nor disposable... that in His hands what the human heart might deem disposable, expendable, of little use if not downright embarrassing... in His hands, in the economy of God, “all heaven breaks loose” and a new creation is possible. Remember this is the Lord who moulds and shapes even the dry land!

In Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill Wilson writes of Twelve Promises, #3 is “We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it”... is this an extravagant promise... (and the answer is expected loudly, confidently) WE THINK NOT! You see, even the leftovers of our past may be collected and used in a wholesome, healthy way in the hands of God.

Jesus said, Jesus says, “They, he, she... you, me need not go away. Do not dismiss them”.

Jacob, a patriarch of Israel, struggles with God and is wounded, damaged for life... does he consider the struggle, the conflict and deem it of no value (send it away, dismiss it)... oh no. That struggle, and the continuing evidence of weakness, is conserved and will forever remind Jacob (and all the people of God) of our crucial need to depend upon God and never wholly upon ourselves. That day when Jacob hurt his leg as the angel kicked the pedestal from under him (!), that day gives to Jacob a wound which need not be ignored! Goodness... what a message! Even the wounds that we have carried, though not inflicted by God, even they may hear this clarion call, "They need not be sent away, repressed and hidden. With God there is no need to dismiss them".

And then Paul hears the nascent Christian community making noises (unpleasant and uncharitable and uninformed noises) about the place of the Jewish people in the new community... there were some (perhaps even converted Jews) who sought to banish, cast out, evict, expel the Jews but Paul reminds the church that these are the people to whom belong "the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the law, the worship, the promises... the patriarchs..... the Messiah!"... and so, can you hear it, with the same voice sounding, with the same heart beating of his divine Master, Paul charges, "Do not send them away, do not dismiss them!".

When society, despite its talk, is actually seen to treat people as expendable, disposable... when our concern for the homeless, destitute, unemployed and, yes, unemployable, is most clearly shown by the vigorous way we move them from our sight, from our Square... then we do not speak with the same voice as the Master who said, "Do not send them away, do not dismiss them".

When the church, despite its talk, is actually seen to restrict its welcome, to limit its reception to pre-qualified "buyers"... then we do not speak with the same voice as the Master who said, "Do not send them away, do not dismiss them".

And, friends, when we, despite our talk, repress our pain and conceal our wounds, mute our anxieties and make quiet our fears... then we do not speak with the same voice as the Master who said, "Do not send them away, do not dismiss them".

Psalm 56:8 reads (yes, the Message Translation!) – "Lord, you have kept track of my every toss and turn through the sleepless nights. Each tear is recorded in your ledger; each ache written in your book"... "do not send them away, do not dismiss them".

I said earlier that perhaps Jesus needed to instruct the disciples to collect the leftovers... I hope my first reading is wrong.

More encouraging, more inspiring is that having seen Jesus refuse to dismiss the crowds, the hearts of the disciples were changed so that they could now only speak, act, think, love with these words in mind, "Do not send them away, do not dismiss them".

Lord, change our hearts also! Amen