

Thursday 23rd July 2020

“Now the Jewish Feast of the Passover was near. When Jesus looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward Him, He said to Philip, ‘Where can we buy bread for these people to eat?’ But He was asking this to test him, for He knew what He was about to do.

Philip answered, ‘Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to have a small piece.’

One of His disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to Him, ‘Here is a boy with five barley loaves and two small fish. But what difference will these make among so many?’”

John 6:4-8

In this narration of the feeding of the five thousand in the Gospel of John, we gain an insight into the mind-set of Philip, one of Jesus’s apostles. Philip was one of the first disciples to follow Jesus. In fact, whereas Simon Peter and Andrew sought out Jesus (John 1:35-42), Jesus sought out Philip and called him by name to follow him (John 1:43). Jesus clearly saw something in Philip.

Like Andrew and Peter, Philip came from Bethsaida (John 1:44) and, from his Greek name (Phil-ippos means ‘lover of horses’ in Greek) and his association with other Greek worshippers later in the Gospel (John 12:20-22), it is not unreasonable to suppose that Philip was a Hellenistic Jew (that is to say he was one who adopted the language and culture of the Greeks as opposed to the more ‘old-school’ Hebraic Jews).

Whatever his background, it appears that he was not an optimist. When Jesus asks him how they will feed the huge crowd, Philip’s first instinct is to consider the problem in material terms. He quickly calculates that, even if they had 200 denarii (which was a fortune – about 8 months’ wages), they could barely provide them with a light snack.

His friend, Andrew, in similarly pragmatic mode, looks around to see what materials are at hand and reaches an equally downbeat conclusion.

Bear in mind, however, that only a little while earlier, Philip and Andrew had witnessed Jesus performing a miracle at Cana, turning water into (lots of) wine. As John recounts (2:11) *“He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him”*. Possibly so, but it is not long before their faith is forgotten and they revert to thinking about things in purely human, material terms.

As we all know, Jesus then proceeded to divide the five loaves and two fishes, producing enough food to feed the multitude with twelve baskets of leftovers to spare. What Philip and Andrew had failed to realise is that *“with God all things are possible”* (Matt. 19:26).

How often do we, when presented with a tricky situation, revert in the first instance to disillusionment when we can’t find a practical solution? And, even if we commit the situation to God, how often do we try to second guess how he will be able to fix it for us?

Like the apostles, we are often very slow to realise what God is capable of doing. Being human, our understanding of the nature of God and of his ways is imperfect. *“Now we see but a poor reflection, as in a mirror”* (1 Cor. 13:12).

Let us pray instead that God might transform our world view, open our eyes to his possibilities and teach us to surrender ourselves more readily to his perfect plans.