



GETTING WHAT GOD WANTS

NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST 25th July 2021

Readings: 2 Kings 4:42-44; Psalm 145:10-18;
Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

Roberta Smith is a journalist and art critic for the New York Times. She has often been critical about the state of art museums, saying they have become driven by the desire to be financially successful. They mount exhibitions that are terminally afflicted by what looks like a “certifiable fear of art”. They often behave less and less like museums. They represent the failure to simply “let art be art” and to allow it to work its effect. It is as though for those in charge of museums and exhibitions these days, art is not enough.

The same could be said of a number of venerable institutions in our society, including the church. There is a crisis of identity, a desire for “success” and a willingness to cater to consumerist demands.

The Rev. Dale Rosenberger, a minister of the United Church of Christ in the USA and writer on mission and outreach, echoes Roberta Smith: "What do art museums want?" He asks, "What do churches want?" then changes the question to "What does God want for the church?" He suggests that it's become unclear who the church is. "In too many cases we want to be anything and everything but the church. Much of what we do evinces a certifiable fear of Jesus, crucified and resurrected" just as the museums seem to have a certifiable fear of art and have become driven by the desire for financial success and have as a result lost their original identity.

This isn't new. Throughout its history, the church has periodically forgotten its identity and become side-tracked and had to be brought back to its original purpose through various reform movements, e.g., the founding of monastic communities, the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Reformation, the charismatic movement, the second Vatican Council. Then those reform movements themselves become sort of encased in concrete, rigid and stultified, until another one arises and so on.

The last few decades have seen a shift in the church's role and influence in society. We have been pushed to the margins. As Christians face persecution in many places, we in the West are more likely to be ignored. One reaction to that is panic. "How can we regain our place in society? How can we survive? How can we increase our numbers? How do we communicate in a 'relevant' way?" These are probably the wrong questions. They lead to wrong solutions like taking desperate measures, anything to draw a crowd. Or to

look for quick fixes. Do they work? You bet. At least some of them do. That's what makes them so attractive.

But many of them can be implemented without asking the foundational questions about the church's identity and what God wants for the church.

For some time now there has been an emphasis on the ministry of all the baptised, not just those who are ordained. This ministry of all the baptised, lay and ordained, is to be built on a firm theological foundation, not on the whim of the moment or what's currently in vogue or on the "way we've always done it."

The goal is not to staunch our numerical decline or our financial downturn but to share the Good News of Jesus and to assist us in thinking theologically. Many Anglicans have a woeful ignorance when it comes to their faith. Many have never really joined the church; they've just never left. They've remained in a state of spiritual infancy, of retarded development. Then any challenge to move forward or to go deeper or broader in their faith is seen as a risk or even a threat. Jesus said the truth will make you free, not bound up. Yet the predominant mood in many churches is one of abject fear.

Our focus is not the church itself or the priest or the people. It's Jesus. If we know Jesus, if Jesus is our friend, should we feel awkward and fearful in his presence?

Dale Rosenberger says, "We are too embarrassed to proclaim Christ's reign and too awkward to unabashedly glorify God. For neither of those acts

would answer the question that more impresses and obsesses us: "What's in it for me? . . . Too often we want to be anything but the church of Jesus Christ."

Today's Gospel pictures a Jesus of compassion who feeds the multitude and meets their physical need – their hunger. We, the church, are called to minister to the needs of people. We're called to feed the hungry, to heal the sick, to care for the afflicted, to support the weak and the vulnerable, to fight injustice.

After giving bread to the crowd – more than they could eat – twelve baskets of leftovers were collected, then the crowd tried to make Jesus king. He gets out of there as quickly as possible. The crowd has badly misunderstood who Jesus is. The same thing happens today. Jesus is about more than filling our deep hunger, healing our hurts and meeting our needs.

Then we move from the hillside to the sea which is rough due to a strong wind. It's dark. Jesus comes to the disciples in the boat, walking on the sea. The disciples were terrified. Were they terrified because they saw Jesus walking on the sea? Someone walking on the surface of the water is not something you see every day. Or was it, as one commentator has suggested, because Jesus was "coming near the boat" as John tells us?

Could this be the reason for the prevailing fear in many churches? Could it be the reason for our inhibition and self-consciousness in sharing our faith and in our worship? Are we terrified that Jesus may get too close? Often chatter and conversation is a way people use to cover their discomfort. Or changing the subject as

quickly as possible. Quick, let's talk about something else. Keeping Jesus from getting too close. It scares us.

It may be a fearful thing to realise that Jesus is not our cosmic therapist or our life-coach or self-help guru or feel-good expert. Jesus is not only the one who feeds and heals. Jesus is also the one who saves, who rescues us from sin and all that degrades and defaces God's image in us. He calls us to change, to repent, to be converted, to baptism, to new life.

We'll be spending time in this sixth chapter of John over the next few weeks. For now, let me ask you to ponder two questions based on today's Gospel:

1. In our mission and outreach, what do we offer people that they couldn't find anywhere else?
2. Are Jesus and the church a means for you to get what you want or a way for God to get what God wants?

Fr Mark