

“Send the people away.”

This line of apostolic policy is not confined to the historical Twelve disciples of the Lord. It's actually a living presence in the Church of every age, and in every age Jesus has to choose ways of refusing it and turning the minds of his followers to a more trustful path.

The reason why the Twelve want to disperse the crowd is not hard to find: they're afraid that the needs of the crowd will be more than they can meet from their own resources. For them, the presence of the crowds is rapidly appearing as a liability.

Their opening remark to Jesus points out that they are in a *heremos*, a desert. They originally set out to this place to share a moment of solitude after Herod's slaughter of John the Baptist. The people's following them has turned it into another hard day's work, and we may well think of the disciples' feeling as sulky and disgruntled. Now their instinct is to disperse their congregation: *send the people away*.

I think this is quite significant. Last week we meditated a little on the theme of desire, the feelings of a man who has found a treasure hidden in a field, or a pearl of special value: the desire unites his life and his possessions: he sells all he has to fulfil it.

Today the desire of the crowd for Jesus and for his gifts has brought them similarly into the desert, a place where they have left everything and accepted the sharp and palpable poverty a desert imposes. We find a sharp difference between the attitude of Jesus and that of his disciples towards the implications of the gathered congregation - that is, towards the needs - and desires - of the Church. Jesus' attitude is contradictory: *there is no need to send them away....there is no need for them to go*.

The provision for the people that is made in the minds of the Church has a long way to go before it reaches any parity with the mind of Christ. In the first Church in Jerusalem, born in the full bloom of the first Pentecost, there was the kind of sharing which changed the hearts of all who saw it, a sharing which was truly consonant with the hope of the kingdom. Paul tried to prolong its quality by widening its sources, when he institutes that filial collection for the needs of Jerusalem, the “mother church” of all others. But the Church became institutionalised, and the end result was that creaking institutional generosity which looks to social workers and the NHS to replace the real compassion we should feel for our real neighbour. It was unheard-of when I was a child for a church even to provide a lavatory for its congregation; the ordinary compassion for human needs was so lacking.

If we were pushed to explain that way of thinking, we should probably have taken refuge in the Johannine theme of seeking the true bread of eternity and not the bread that passes away; of seeking the water that springs up to eternal life, not that which leaves us thirsty again. But in the real Gospel Jesus gave both. He cared for the bodies as clearly as for the spirits of those who came to him. And it was in the body that the people who flocked to him first knew that they were in the presence of the miraculous. The God who filled us with desires did not do so to disappoint us, but to lead us beyond our present condition into the kingdom of the resurrection. If our coming to Christ demands that we take a journey into the desert, where no bodily resources are to be found, maybe it is because there we shall discover the miracle that will transform our desires and sanctify them. The people have shown their willingness to risk themselves in that inhospitable place. Jesus is determined that they should find him responding as generously as they have come. We are hearing a personal invitation today from the Lord, to let ourselves be gathered in our poverty, in our neediness, where we hunger and thirst for life. It is when we share these unlikely treasures that we will discover the miraculous gifts of God in Christ, who came to call sinners, to heal the sick, and to raise the dead to life.