

Today's Gospel starts with Jesus, seeking a lonely place after hearing of the death of his cousin John. In this, I suspect Jesus would have remembered the accounts from Mary concerning how John jumped in Elizabeth's womb, when she approached Jesus in the womb of Mary. What follows from this time, in a lonely place is the compassion of Jesus for the crowds. The biblical Hebrew for compassion is Raḥmana which in turn comes from "reḥem," the womb. The biblical foundation of compassion is the love of God, which is described in terms of the love of a parent for their child.

Compassion plays a central role in this Sunday's readings. Earlier in Matthew's Gospel Jesus had felt similar compassion for the crowds when he stepped ashore, this compassion is the compassion of the shepherd feeling for his flock: "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd", this prompts Him to send the twelve apostles into the harvest. Jesus expresses compassion for two groups of people: the anawim, the poor ones who became the faithful remnant - and those that society condemned, the tax collectors, prostitutes and criminals.

In feeding the five thousand, Jesus chooses to involve the disciples, not necessarily to be more efficient, but rather as a reminder of what was to happen when he is resurrected. This was to be the task of the church. The miraculous element seems to remind us that this is not just about providing for the physical needs of people, but also the deeper needs of the spiritual person.

All this seems to also point to a banquet, which looks forward to the banquet of heaven that we celebrate when we celebrate the Eucharist. The Eucharist is a challenge to each of us to reflect on our compassion to those around us.

Fr Paul O'Donoghue