I suspect I’m not the only parent who remembers vividly, and without much delight, the days when it was impossible to go anywhere – even the bathroom – without a determined escort of toddlers.
I have always loved my children extravagantly – but nonetheless there were times when I was so desperate for a few minutes on my own that I was tempted to consider violence...and that was just on ordinary days, with no particular need for personal space.

But today’s gospel starts with Jesus in need of time out. In the verses immediately preceding those we have just heard, he learns of the cruel death of John the Baptist. Jesus is hurt, grieving the loss of his cousin. He may well be anxious... What does this mean for him and for his ministry? He needs space to reflect, time with his heavenly Father – but the crowds, as relentlessly demanding as any gaggle of small children, are completely unable to leave him alone. He takes to a boat – to no avail. Desperate! Exasperating! But Jesus is Jesus – and, rather than snapping at those crowds like an exhausted parent, rather than telling them to go away and leave him in PEACE – he has compassion. Nothing surprising in that. “Jesu, thou art all compassion” we sing, following Charles Wesley ...and then watch that compassion unfold in action. Jesus puts himself in their place and suffers with them...because co-suffering is the essence of compassion – but as that's not the whole story. Compassion, essentially, goes beyond empathic feelings to action to alleviate the pain. And naturally, this is how Jesus responds. He recognises the people's need for healing and hope and he acts.

And so we find ourselves involved in one of our favourite miracles... We all know the story – so what on earth can I possibly find to say? Wouldn't I be better off with the other reading? So much richness in that account of wrestling with God till we have secured a blessing. Surely that would be a better message for us as we engage with the news this week. How can loaves and fishes help us to cope with the memories of 1914 and the pain of 2014? For me, the clue lies in that word compassion. As we have watched events in Gaza unfold over the past few weeks, as we have heard of the suffering of our brothers and sisters in Iraq, as we’ve contemplated the plight of the Syrian refugees, and reflected on the grief and fear of those close to the centre of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, I'm confident that we have all felt sympathy. How could any human being fail to do so? The pain of the world has been real and oppressive wherever we turn. Men, women, children are enduring horrific situations...and we long for that to change. We pray for them, we do indeed wrestle for a blessing....but we feel, for the most part, utterly helpless. What can we do, you and I, – such ordinary people, so very far away?
But this is where our gospel comes in. You know exactly what happens...of course you do. There are crowds of hungry people, Jesus is exhausted and sad – and the disciples go for the practical option. These people need to go home. There's nothing else for them here. “Send the crowds away” they demand.

But they've reckoned without that overwhelming compassion, which means that Jesus cannot and will not fit in with their sensible solutions. Of course, he could simply feed them himself – produce a meal from thin air and satisfy everyone. He COULD, after all, have turned stones to bread in the wilderness. But his compassion has yet another layer – for he responds to our need to be part of his work of grace. C S Lewis wrote “If He who in Himself can lack nothing, chooses to need us, it is because we need to be needed.” His essential impulse to love and give unstintingly meets our human longing to be needed - and that meeting point is fertile ground for something extraordinary to flourish. Jesus recognises this. He chooses to involve his disciples - “You give them something to eat” He chooses to involve the crowd themselves. It always delights me that it is a child who offers his lunch. Only a child would have that kind of spontaneous generosity... Only a child would not, prudently, keep his resources to himself “Pick me, I've got a packed lunch...pick me, pick me...” Those same children who pursued me relentlessly as I longed for space were the ones who, when I wept over money worries, offered me necklaces of daisy chains “to make things better” - and somehow, they did! Only a child would believe that what his mother had provided for him would be enough to suffice come what may... Only a child...

Small wonder, then, that they are Christ's model for the Kingdom All of us would surely have hung back...trying to hide our smiles at such naivete....perhaps tutted a little that the disciples don't immediately shoo this urchin away, and get to work on a more practical solution.

But that's not how Jesus reacts. He understands that impulsive, unreasonable generosity – that longing to make things better, without any resources to achieve it. He takes that tiny, pathetic, inadequate offering – blesses it – and transforms it into something impossible. Food for 5,000 plus – with leftovers as well. Enough for the needs of everyone and to spare.

And that's what he does every time. He takes what we bring, however tiny, pathetic, inadequate – blesses it – and transforms it into something impossible. That's what happens whenever we make Eucharist together. We bring our longings, hopes and dreams, our failures, disappointments ...for they are all that we have to offer.

Augustine wrote to his congregation "You are to be taken. You are to be blessed, broken and distributed, that you may be the means of grace and vehicles of eternal love. In you and through you the work of incarnation must go forward".

In other words, this offering of our broken selves is as necessary as the child's lunch. We bring those selves to place them on the altar – and receive in exchange God's own life, given to us in a fragment of bread and a sip of wine.
But we have to risk bringing ourselves as we are – with all our inadequacies – if that transformation is to take place. We have to accept that we may well look foolish...for all that we have is very little, ourselves and just enough faith that God will work his miracle of transformation, so that, by his grace, we can be enough.

Do we dare to practice active compassion? Our world surely needs it, and however small we may feel in the face of the enormity of its pain, as I seem to have read somewhere, “Our task is great but our God is greater”. Can we trust him to use our small deeds of compassion to make the big difference that is needed? If we look back 100 years, each individual cigarette give out to the troops by “Woodbine Willy” made no difference at all – but the impact of his kindness endures today. As we turn to the news, the loss of those doctors who contracted Ebola as they fought against it may seem a pointless waste, but their courageous compassion will surely have been a light in the fearful darkness that encircled their patients. We won't have much to bring ..maybe even less than 5 loaves and 2 small fishes – but we know that if we offer them with goodwill, then through God's grace they will be enough and to spare, for in God's economy our meagre resources are transformed to satisfy the needs of all, friend or foe, neighbour or stranger, those whom we long to help and those that we would never choose. All can be satisfied - with 12 baskets left over.