Well, it feels like a while since I have stood here – what with one thing and another, there’s been quite a lot going on. As those of you who are more regular will know, there has been a good deal of travelling on behalf of the Community of the Cross of Nails, and more recently some holiday too. It’s good to be back – especially in the run up to summer, when it feels as though things should be slackening off a little. Taking it easy – maybe having the odd run out into the country for a picnic. What should I take – some rolls, perhaps, and some peppered mackerel?

This last week, Ricarda and I have been on Bardsey Island, or Ynys Enlli, the island in the currents. It’s an ancient pilgrim island, about two miles off the end of the Llyn peninsula in North Wales. It is one of those ultimate get away from it all destinations: there’s no electricity, no shops, no cars, no internet, a little bit of mobile phone signal if you go right to one end of the island and the wind is blowing in the right direction, definitely no 3G, and it’s probably best not to go into details over the sewerage arrangements. You have to take absolutely everything with you that you are going to need for the week, or the weeks that you are going for – and a little bit extra because there’s always the possibility that the weather will kick off and you’ll be stuck there for a few extra nights. (I hadn’t actually explained that to colleagues before I went – but I was confident they would be able pick up the baton if needed.)

It did seem to me that there was an interesting and enjoyable parallel with today’s gospel reading – which could be titled, ‘God will provide – but it might get a bit rough’. This passage occurs in all the gospels – an indication of how fundamental it was to the early Christians’ understanding of who Jesus was, so it’s worth us paying quite close attention to it. We will be doing that over the next few weeks, as we make our way through John’s version of it throughout chapter six of his gospel. In all versions of the story, Jesus is being followed, actually pursued, by a large crowd. They think something important is happening, and they want to be part of it. But the sad truth is that they are not quite going to get what it is – both the crowd, and actually the disciples, are slow to understand, to grasp the real significance of what Jesus is up to. It seems they are thinking small, but Jesus, as always, is thinking big – and issuing a twofold challenge: trust in me, trust also in yourself. Or, more fully, trust in me to do what’s needed with what God has given to you – when you give it back to me. But – and this is the message of the second half of today’s reading – don’t expect it to be plain sailing from now on.

So, we all know the story – at least, I guess we do. Little Billy has been sent along by his mum with his pack lunch and with the naïve optimism and hope of youth offers it to Jesus, because he’s the only one who really believes that somehow it will be enough. Actually, it’s only John’s gospel that suggests it was a boy who had the picnic – the others attribute the food simply to the disciples. What happened next is a matter for the imagination. What we know is that first Jesus took the food and blessed it, or gave thanks – which in a sense come to the same thing, as in both actions he is acknowledging that it has really been given, like all things, by God, and now he is now praying that it will fulfil its purpose. (It’s an action that we should repeat, often, with all that God gives us – and especially what God gives us to share.) Then he broke the loaves, or distributed them … and somehow, there was enough. Not just enough, but more than enough – just how much more is carefully recorded so that it should not be missed. Some suggest that the one child’s act of generosity inspired everyone else to dig into their pockets and share. Some say that it was a sort of Paul Daniels act – Jesus was standing in front of a cave which had been cunningly stocked beforehand and they fed supplies to Jesus from behind his back. Others say the fish were actually whales. Sometimes the explanations become more implausible than the miracle. It does bother me, a bit, how it happened – I just can’t imagine it … but it’s there, and its significance is clear.

How clear is brought out by one or two of the words in the Greek text: the word for “give thanks” is a prime example. You can probably guess: it’s “eucharistiasas”. Jesus’ action looks both backwards and forwards – backwards, to the feeding of the wandering people of Israel in a deserted place, for forty years - the point of it being a desert is laboured in the other gospels to leave us in no doubt, and becomes explicit later in this chapter in John. But also forward, to the Eucharistic provision, which is brought to the fore by John in his gospel. He even tells us that it was
nearly Passover, to drive the point home – and then uses this word which is picked up in our name for the Holy Communion – Eucharist. And when he asks the people to sit down, he doesn’t just say, “sit down” – the word is “recline”, as they did at feasts. They must have wondered what on earth was going on. And then they find themselves in the first Eucharistic feast, with Jesus as the host, being who he naturally is.

Our holiday on Bardsey was actually a bit of a retreat – a way of getting the week to do double duty, as it were. In the mornings, we read and wrote and prayed and did some sort of arty retreat sort of things. And Ricarda baked bread. In the afternoon we went for walks on the island - it’s not very big, but there’s lots to look at, especially the seals and the things thrown up on the beaches. One of the books I took with me was a meditation on Psalm 34.8 – just that, actually just the first half, which reads: ‘O taste and see that the Lord is good’. I read that the Orthodox use that verse as part of their Eucharistic liturgy, encouraging us to respond to God not just in our minds, or even our hearts, but in the whole of our bodies.

So, God gives everything – and God asks for everything. And whatever we give to him, he takes and turns, and gives it back to us – our thoughts, our emotions – all our needs. God is, by nature, a giver – our giving God. It can be hard to take this in, in the midst of our over busy and under thankful lives, and sometimes we need something very physical, like the bread and wine of communion, to jolt us back into simply accepting that God offers us everything – but also asks for everything. Here is true simplicity: God gives all, God asks for all. It’s a partnership.

And then, just when it’s all going so well, Jesus takes off again – and the disciples are left, wondering what to do. So they head for home – clearly, we discover later, watched by the crowds. Perhaps they were anxious about what they might be expected to do … whatever the reason, they found themselves pretty soon in difficulties. The wind was rising, and then they saw Jesus again, in a way that struck terror into their hearts. Time once again seems to be suspended, as Jesus speaks to them, they want to take him into the boat – why? For his own protection? – and then we are told that they immediately reach the land. Whether Jesus has got into the boat or not is unclear.

So what’s going on? Well, Mark and Matthew also have this incident immediately following the feeding of the five thousand – so our first answer is, reasonably, that this simply relates the order of events as they happened. But there is more to the story than that, of course, and the other two gospels also draw out explicitly the lesson for the disciples that Jesus is truly the Son of God – the Lord of Heaven and earth.

So what are we to make of this? It just so happens that the Cathedral Chapter will be looking this week at our half year financial results. First signs are, shall we say, challenging. Parallels with the concern on the part of the disciples in the first part of today’s gospel seem appropriate. There is a whole complex of reasons for this, which I am going to say a little about following next week’s service, once Chapter has had a chance to consider them properly. A careful and considered response, which takes account of all the resources we have, is called for, as it has been so often before. Looking ahead, there may be some choppy water, but we know where we are going and we know we are not alone in the task. We’ll talk a little about that, too, and how we are going to tackle the challenges.

And then we had to come home. There was a slight frisson of hope through the Friday evening that the wind was picking up, and that we would have to stay another week. Someone else would have to pick up the sermon. The sub dean would have to chair the Cathedral Chapter meeting on Tuesday. But things don’t often work out like that – we have to travel the roads before us, but we discover the grace of God with us on the way.

Our first reading today was one of the greatest passages of hope and rich promise that we read anywhere in the New Testament. It’s a prayer from Paul that the people of God will somehow catch fire with the inexhaustible love of Christ, which transcends anything we could think or imagine. The doxology is often used to draw sermons to an end, directing us to the source of our confidence and our salvation, and I’m going to use it in that way to set our constellation in place this morning. Here it is – Ephesians Chapter 3, verses 20 and 21:

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.