

Lyn Valley Mission Community

Eighth Sunday after Trinity

Please read through these passages slowly and reflectively before reading my sermon.

Isaiah 55:1-5 Ps 145:15-end Romans 9:1-5

Matthew 14:13-21

In writing and reading, speaking and listening, may God be known, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

The story of the feeding of the five thousand men and even more women and children is a very familiar Gospel story. It is told by all four of the evangelists and there are some clear themes that often find their way into sermons: God's transformation of small offerings into all that is needed and more: the Eucharistic pattern of Jesus blessing, breaking and giving his disciples the bread to share, the echoes of the manna given by God to the people in the wilderness.

As I was reading Matthew's telling of the story this time though, something new struck me which I had never fully noticed before.

"when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat...."

The story begins with Jesus seeking out a deserted place to be by himself. That is not unusual in the gospels – very often Jesus goes aside to pray, his ministry is grounded in that deep relationship with the Father nourished by times alone in prayer. But in this case, according to Matthew, there is a particularly challenging reason.

What Jesus has just heard is that John the Baptist has been brutally murdered by Herod.

To me, that gives this story a particular atmosphere which our familiar children's Bible story books might gloss over. It begins with Jesus seeking space perhaps to mourn his cousin and companion in the mission, perhaps to come to terms with the collision course he too is on with the authorities around him, perhaps to seek some safe distance while he considers what the death of John means for him; he seeks a deserted place at a time of vulnerability.

The crowds flock to find him regardless.

And he is moved with compassion at their vulnerability too. “Compassion” literally means “suffering-with”. From a place of identification with their human fragility he heals their sick. He offers what he has to give of God’s restorative love.

As evening draws close, the disciples highlight that they are all in quite a vulnerable place: a deserted place, far from resources. The disciples feel that everyone should be encouraged to get back to where they can be sure of finding food – going back to their villages for supplies. They too are full concern for the people but they cannot see that they have anything to draw on to be able to help, they are perhaps overwhelmed by concern at the situation.

Very gently, Jesus leads them to a reaction that is more like his: “you give them something to eat”

You can almost hear their sense of helplessness in their voices: we have nothing here but five loaves and two fish”

It is as if they are saying to Jesus: we know what we should be able to do, but we just don’t have the resources. We have nothing more than those around us.

There is an honesty, a humility and the roots of compassion in their response too.

And Jesus simply asks them to bring their honest poverty of resources to him.

And in the midst of all that vulnerability: Jesus’ own grief and insecurity, the disciples feelings of inadequacy, the crowd’s unpreparedness and in a deserted place far from comfort or supplies, God’s grace in all its generosity is revealed.

Bread blessed and broken and shared is enough.

Enough to feed many more than five thousand people and to fill twelve baskets of left-overs.

Enough to create a feast, enough to meet the need in God’s way.

I wonder if reading the story this way offers a particular gift of hope to us at this time.

Jesus and his disciples do not minister to the crowd from a rarefied place in which they are detached from the crowd that needs them. They are among them in the same poverty, the same uncertainty, the same vulnerability. What they have they offer in the service of all: Jesus offers his deep trust in the Father's provision and his willingness to be the Father's instrument of grace. The disciples offer their trust in Jesus and the small resources that they have and a miracle transforms a place of vulnerability to a place of companionship (literally eating bread together), healing and renewed energy.

In so many ways we are all living through times when we are aware of our human fragility and vulnerability. I don't need to labour the uncertainty about how the Covid 19 virus can be contained internationally; we know that the structures of our economy have been badly shaken by it; these things are felt in every community. The church is not immune, it doesn't stand in some rarefied place. As reports about Westminster Abbey's financial worries this week have highlighted, at a national level the resources of the church are diminished. PCC members know that locally too. During this time we have also seen that as members of the church we are as dependent on our neighbours as we might have hoped they could be on us. Even our planning to return to worship takes into consideration there is so much that we cannot do as normal.

And yet,

our gospel today reminds us that it is in the midst of our vulnerability that we can seek out Jesus, and that from his own understanding of human frailty he meets us with compassion and leads us, just as he did his disciples, to discover with honesty and humility the few resources that we have. As we let him take and bless, break open and share what we have to offer, God's generous grace can offer new life, new energy, and companionship in ways we might not expect.

So as followers of Jesus we do not need to be afraid of feeling grief, anxiety or vulnerability – Jesus has been there. We do not need to be afraid of not having very much to offer those around us- we are in good company with the first disciples.

What we do need is the honesty and humility to accept what we are feeling, our limitations and our poverty and to be willing to hand them over to God – to be taken, blessed, broken and shared in the world in ways that God knows best.

Lord Jesus, we seek you in our need, and with the needs of our world and your church. As you draw us to yourself, take us, bless us, break open in us the riches of your compassion and share you love through us for your own miraculous purpose. Amen