

SERMON – 2/8/20
'Bring them here to me'

Isaiah 55:1-6

Matthew 14:13-21

What are you struggling most with just now? All of us will have specific challenges that are particular to our own situation and we may feel that no-one else understands and perhaps even that no-one else has ever been where we are. We also share the challenges of the day that are affecting everyone in our society at the moment – the limitations on life as we have previously known it that are the result of measures in place to protect life in the face of a previously unimagined threat. As Christians we share too the challenge of being the Church in a post-Christian society where the old certainties were crumbling and traditional expressions of faith were becoming unsustainable even before lock-down changed everything in the blink of an eye. There are certainly plenty struggles for us to contend with, but don't think it was any different for Jesus and His disciples.

Our Gospel reading this morning is a familiar one – the feeding of the 5000 is only one of Jesus' miracles to be recounted in all four Gospels so it must be significant – and we will all have heard many different sermons drawing out the many lessons

This morning I want to focus on the context in which the miracle took place rather than on what was going on with the five loaves and two fish. Immediately prior to this episode in Matthew's Gospel is the account of the death of John the Baptist who, you remember, was a close relative of Jesus' and the one who in God's purposes had been sent to prepare the way for Him. Jesus Himself, then, was struggling with grief and perhaps with a renewed sense of foreboding about what lay ahead of Him, and Matthew tells us here that Jesus had the intention of going to a lonely place by Himself to pray. Although also recounting John's martyrdom, Mark tells the story of the feeding of the 5000, as does Luke, just after the return of the Twelve disciples from the mission which Jesus had sent them on to preach the Kingdom of God. The disciples were also struggling with physical and spiritual exhaustion, and Mark tells us that Jesus was taking them off by themselves to get some rest.

Whatever you and I may be struggling with at this time, Jesus invites us to come away with Him not in the sense of running away from our troubles

but to recharge our batteries and to get things into perspective. That was what Jesus Himself knew that He needed to do and that is why the habit of weekly worship and daily prayer is such an important one to cultivate. In the words of the 23rd Psalm, the Lord our Shepherd seeks to restore our souls.

So here they are, Jesus and disciples, looking forward to a wee bit of rest and recuperation, but when they get out of the boat there is a crowd of thousands there before them. I know how I would feel if I arrived at my holiday hideaway to be greeted by half the congregation. But despite His own grief, Jesus, we're told, 'was filled with pity for them' – the Greek word that Matthew uses means that His whole insides heaved with compassion for them. Wow! And we learn that He reached out to heal those who were ill.

Perhaps the disciples were having a harder time of it, although the fact that they came to Jesus as evening drew near with concern for where all these people were going to find food displays a certain compassion too. However, it has to be said that it is probably out of tiredness and self-interest that they plead with Jesus to send them away to get provisions.

It is here that Jesus completely shifts the ground on which the disciples are standing – 'The crowd don't *have* to leave' He says. 'You yourselves give them something to eat.' (v.16) I think if I had been one of the Twelve that would have been the point at which I threw in the towel – exhausted and deprived of a longed-for break, to be told that I was responsible for finding food in a remote place for thousands of people would have tipped me over the edge, I think. And many of us in the midst of our struggles do come to the point where the last straw is laid on us and we collapse in a heap.

'All we have here are five loaves and two fish' – in John's account, it is Andrew who has found the boy with something he is willing to share, and we will all have heard sermons about that link in the chain. Andrew recognises that it's not going to go far amongst such a crowd, but Jesus utters what is perhaps the key message in this sermon: 'Then bring them here to me.'

Isn't that what Jesus Himself did with His grief and His struggles? He brought them to His heavenly Father in prayer. Isn't that what the disciples had already done in bringing their tiredness to Jesus and in bringing to Him the fact that the crowd needed to find food? Isn't that what we each need to

do as individuals, as a church, as a society in the face of those things that are beyond us – and how many of those there are: personal trials, the whole Covid situation in tackling the spread of the virus, in dealing with the care of those who fall ill, in coping with the economic implications of lock-down and the challenges of coming out of lock-down safely, and that's before we think about the challenges facing the church in our time. Jesus says, 'Bring them here to me.'

When the disciples bring the bread and the fish, Jesus takes control and orders the people to sit down on the grass. It's no accident in the context of a Middle Eastern setting that Mark makes a point of describing the grass as being *green* and that John goes out of his way to tell us that there was *lots* of grass – in the words of the Psalm that we sang earlier, the Good Shepherd is taking the flock to green pastures; He is preparing a table before them where all are satisfied and there is more left over. It's no accident that in John's Gospel where there is no account of the institution of the Lord's Supper, it is in the account of the Feeding of the 5000 announces 'I am the Bread of Life' and that 'those who come to me will never be hungry.' (John 6:35)

What are you struggling with just now? And how are you going to cope with it? Our human instinct is to be self-sufficient but Jesus' way is to go and ask for help and as disciples of Jesus, we also need to be ready to ask for help, both from others and from the Lord. Our human instinct is to put self-interest or self-preservation first but Jesus' way is to have compassion on others, so as disciples of Jesus perhaps we should be looking up from our own situation and considering what others' needs might be first. Our human instinct is to find a rational or material answer to our problems but Jesus encourages us to consider the radical alternative – 'the crowds don't *have* to leave' He says to His disciples when they ask Him to send them away – and as disciples of Jesus today perhaps we need to be thinking out of the box when it comes to answers to our struggles. Finally our human instinct is to give up when the going gets tough whereas Jesus invites us to start where we are and to start with what we have (meagre though it may seem) and bring it to Him. What do you have in your hands already today that may in fact just be the beginning of the answer to your own current struggle or the challenge that the Church is facing in our time or even the current world crisis. Jesus says to us today as He said to His first disciples with the bread and the fish: “Bring them here to me.”

What will Christ do with what you bring to Him this morning? As the apostle Paul would later write, “He is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine.” Now, doesn't that put our struggles in context!

“Have we trials or temptations, is there trouble anywhere, we should never be discouraged, take it to the Lord in prayer. Are we weak and heavy-laden, cumbered with a load of care, Jesus is our only refuge, take it to the Lord in prayer.”