

## **Pentecost 8 – Wesley 9 & 10.30am – 3<sup>rd</sup> of August 2014**

Theme: “The compassion of Christ”

Reading: Matthew 14:13-21 ‘The feeding of the 5,000’

Text: “When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd he had compassion on them and healed their sick.”

Matthew 14:13-14

### Introduction

Many of us who have been brought up in the life of the church know the story of Jesus feeding the masses of people who came to listen to him, in the account of the ‘feeding of the 5,000’. In one form or another it is in all four Gospels. However, how many of us remember the setting and why the crowds followed Jesus particularly at this time?

“When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat to a solitary place.” What Jesus had just heard in this passage was that his good friend and in a sense his mentor, John the Baptist, had been be-headed by Herod as a favour to the dancing of Salome. It is no wonder he needs some time alone to pray and doubtless grieve. Jesus is not the only one to hear the gruesome news. We are also told that the crowds hear the news of John’s demise at Herod’s hands. The people are understandably frightened and are seeking Jesus for both comfort and guidance. Thus, while he is out on a boat on the Sea of Galilee, they follow the boat to where it lands.

### The compassion of Jesus

I find Jesus’ response to the people amazing. Here he is seeking solitude, away from people and then when he lands he is obviously overwhelmed by the masses. My response would be to hop back in the boat and go elsewhere away from everyone. Jesus however is clear in his actions – he has compassion for the people and healed their sick. In his book, ‘The Way of the Heart’ by Henri Nouwen, he links solitude with compassion, which is not something I would naturally think of in our activist based society. Nouwen uses the fourth century Desert Fathers in talking about the link of solitude with compassion. He writes:

“Let us not underestimate how hard it is to be compassionate. Compassion is hard because it requires the inner disposition to go with others to the place where they are weak, vulnerable, lonely and broken. But this is not our spontaneous response to suffering. What we desire most is to do away with suffering by fleeing from it or finding a quick cure for it. As busy, active, relevant ministers (and people), we want to earn our bread by making a real contribution. This means first and foremost doing something to show that our presence makes a difference. And so we ignore our greatest gift, which is our ability to enter into solidarity with those who suffer.

It is in solitude that this compassionate solidarity grows. ....In solitude our heart of stone can be turned into a heart of flesh, a rebellious heart into a contrite heart, and a closed heart into a heart that can open itself to all suffering people in a gesture of solidarity.

If you would ask the Desert Fathers why solitude gives birth to compassion, they would say, ‘Because it makes us die to our neighbour’. At first this answer seems quite disturbing to a modern mind. But when we give it a closer look we can see that in order to be of service to others we have to die to them; that is, we have to give up measuring our meaning and value with the yardstick of others. To die to our neighbours means to stop judging them, to stop evaluating them, and thus to become free to be compassionate. (To care, to love, to walk beside, to listen and so to be with others for their sake and not our own – these are my words). *From The Way of the Heart by Henri J.M. Nouwen (pages 34/35)*

Nouwen concludes this section with these words:

“Thus in and through solitude we do not move away from people. On the contrary, we move closer to them through compassionate ministry.” (page 39)

It is a challenge for us today to link solitude with compassion, but Jesus obviously saw that link and even if his time of solitude on the boat was only short, he came ashore refreshed to give compassion to the people.

### Teaching compassion to the disciples

The disciples didn't fully understand Jesus' compassion and they clearly had had enough of the crowd and urge Jesus to send the people away as 'evening approached'. The disciples 'in a sense', put the responsibility of the crowd onto Jesus. At this point Jesus challenges the disciples and says to them pointedly: "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." (vs 16). In other-words, keep the crowd here as a community and you meet their need for food. In community, needs will be met, is the implication of what Jesus is seeking to teach the disciples. It simply can't be a responsibility of one person but of the whole to care for each other. This collaborative, community approach is the way forward and a solution will be found through it. In remaining together, we may find possibilities none of us could create alone, and surely we will find comfort and companionship in sharing various experiences. Here there is a huge and profound shift in responsibility as Jesus begins to empower the disciples.

All the disciples can come up with is: "We have here only five loaves and two fish." Jesus directs the disciples to bring that food to him, tells the people to sit down on the grass and blesses the food, breaks it and gives it to the disciples to distribute.

Here we have an 'agape' meal – a meal of love shared together.

It is a meal, not unlike the eucharist, a thanksgiving meal where people are encouraged to share as a community and meet each other's needs. In this instance, the need is for food and we read that not only was there enough, there was a heap left over.

Individually, lacking faith and support, the crowd would never be fed with the little food they had. As a community, seeing a need, there was ample food for all with left overs.

Here we have Jesus teaching the disciples the way forward for the kingdom of heaven, the outworking of the parables of Matthew 13, in a real and practical scenario.

Is it a miracle? – yes it is, along with a teaching of the disciples about what can happen as we put ourselves forward, in faith, and allow others to see a little of the vision of what can happen, of what 'may be' as community is developed.

### Reflection for ourselves

People often get 'hung up' on how the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 occurred. For me, this account is not about how that happened. Rather this is an outcome of the generosity and compassion of Christ to the people and in community there is the response of generosity towards one another in need having already experienced what Christ had to offer. The five loaves and the two fish are symbolic of that compassion, that love and that sense of community that leads to ample sufficiency for all.

We know ourselves that there are things that totally overwhelm in our world. Pick an area of suffering – cancer, global hunger, domestic violence, war, terrorism, addiction of one kind or another.

Can we make a difference or are we too paralysed by the breadth of the problem? Jesus here says, 'Yes, we can make a difference'. Allow your faith and your community to act and you act as well. Five loaves and two fish were offered – they were sufficient for the 5,000.

In this passage we are shown a new way forward. We learn about our responsibility for one another and about God's trust in us to provide, with God's help, for the needs of the community. We see the miracle that comes when we renounce the message of scarcity and turn to God in faith, offering what we have and allowing God to bless and multiply even the smallest of gifts.

It begs the question – what is a gift that we can use and give to God that currently we are not really using? Amen.