

10th Sunday after Pentecost 2023 Matthew 14:13-21. The feeding of the 5,000

Our gospel this morning begins with "Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself" (Matt 14:13). What Jesus had just heard, was what had happened to John the Baptist, murdered by Herod Antipas in fulfilment of a vain promise made to his step-daughter Salome; anything she asked for was hers. With the connivance of her mother Herodias, she asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter and got it (Mat 14:1-2).

I think that when Jesus heard, he would have been greatly saddened and grieved. A man who was not only a blood relation but a man whom Jesus had described as the greatest of all the prophets sent by God, had been foully murdered.

So Jesus withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. It is the only image I can find in Scripture of Jesus sailing or rowing a boat by himself. In fact, the disciples who would normally sail or row the boat don't even come into this story until quite late in the piece.

What Jesus did, was cross a short piece of water that cuts across the northern tip of Lake Galilee and come to a deserted place to land. He is seeking seclusion and a place to rest and pray. He needs a mini-Sabbath, even if only for a few hours. In the gospels, whenever Jesus needs succour, strength, and wisdom, he "withdraws" by himself to spend time with the Father. This is what he is planning to do here. (Would it be blasphemous to suggest he is very tired and very sad and wants to go home for a while?)

Our text then continues, "but when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd" (14:13b-14a).

The crowd had seen where he was heading and walked around the tip of Lake Galilee and got there before him. His only time with the Lord for rest and restoration was in the boat! So much for solitude and rest. He doesn't even have the disciples to muster the crowd somehow.

But our wonderful Lord, instead of sighing, "had compassion for them and cured their sick." Jesus heart was moved by their plight. In that moment, he loved them with all the love of God the father. That is what it means when the bible says Jesus was "filled with compassion." It is always followed by healing, as it was in this case – he "cured their sick."

Jesus' greatest teachings, healings and signs mostly happened in the countryside and very rarely in Jerusalem. This is not a farming sort of countryside Jesus came to but a deserted place, also translated a 'lonely' place.

The lost sheep are those who wander off into deserted and lonely places and a good shepherd would find them and they would follow him.

The crowd are flocking to Jesus in this deserted and lonely place to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd saying to them 'come to me, come to me.'

Into this beautiful scene of the pastoral love of God for his children, the disciples finally arrive in the evening. They attempt to bring order and say to Jesus, "send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves" (14:15). But that would utterly destroy what Jesus is doing here. He says, "come to me, always and forever and I will never drive you away."

The disciples need teaching. They are about to be the church and Jesus is teaching them constantly. He needs them to know that no matter what you offer to the Lord for service to the Kingdom of Heaven, it will be multiplied, and what we offer will prove to be exactly the right amount, or size, or experience, or age, or skill, or personality that was needed to accomplish the great and mysterious ways of God.

The crowd needs feeding, they have seen the living God filled with power in word and deed, yet gentle and compassionate, and they have never seen anything like it. Their lives have been changed. They are not going anywhere, who would?

Above all else, in the midst of this healing, holy and pastoral moment, Jesus wants God the Father to be glorified this day.

So he says, not in a peeved or smart-alecky way, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat" (14:16). They reply, "'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me,' ... taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds" (14:17b-18a, 19).

Now the disciples needed to believe that each time they put their hand in the basket, food would be there for the next person. The bread and fish didn't appear on a buffet table and an orderly line maintained as they all ate their fill. No the disciples fed the crowd after. The disciples kept dipping into the baskets and food kept coming out.

That requires faith.

Now what Jesus is doing here is a physical manifestation of his heart of compassion, the very Father heart of God, which always brings life and multiplication. Jesus does all of this because he has the heart of the Father.

He didn't call the crowd or the disciples, and he doesn't call us, to follow him without the intention of providing for us. He doesn't call us to come to church to worship God in spirit

and truth just for something to do on a Sunday morning. No, he calls us to follow him so that he can be our God and we can be his dear children.

He calls us so he can love us, and in loving us, he is able to provide both big and little things for us and we just need to give him whatever scraps we happen to have.

Now we believe that God is very active in a similar way when we too, called by the same Jesus to be part of his body, together eat the bread of heaven and drink the cup of salvation.

I'd ask you to consider the following written by St Ephrem or Ephrem the Syrian, a 4th century (d.373 AD) Syrian monk regarding this miracle feeding.

"Consider, then beloved, how Jesus' creative power penetrates everything. Our Lord took a little bread, and in the twinkling of an eye multiplied it. Work that would take us ten months to accomplish he did with his ten fingers in a moment. His hands were as earth beneath the bread and his voice was as thunder above it. The movement of his lips acted as dew, the breath of his mouth as sunlight, and in a brief moment he accomplished what normally takes much time. Many loaves came from few as in the first blessing: *be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.*"

It is Jesus who calls us to share in the great blessing of creation itself, in the extravagant ever-multiplying hospitality of God, when we share Holy Communion (such a beautiful description) with the Lord and each other. All over the world, the bread of heaven, the broken body of our Saviour Jesus, is being blessed and distributed by disciples to become one body in the one living God.

It's for this reason that Jesus fed the 5,000 and feeds us. He seats us in groups; in parishes and congregations if you like. He gathers us together out of the lonely world and brings us to a deserted place where he can be for us what we cannot be for each other, and our lives are changed. Let me pray ...