

The people are hungry – who will feed them?

Matthew 14: 13-21

Our Bible story today – the Feeding of the 5000 – takes place immediately after another extravagant feeding, but this banquet is as far from the wilderness as you can get, as it takes place inside the palace of Herod, the regional ruler. It was his birthday and he's having the most amazing party with his courtiers and his captains. It's a real boy's event and there's an ample supply of rich food and wine aplenty, and the party is probably in its second or third day. It's fair to say that Herod has had a lot to drink and, as the young daughter of Herodias dances for him, in his drunken enthusiasm, he promises her on oath anything she wanted. Coached by her mother, she demands the head of John the Baptist. Why John's head? Because Herodias had been the wife of Herod's half-brother Herod Philip and John had dared to speak out against the affair, divorce and remarriage. If there had been a first century Jeremy Kyle show, this sordid set of circumstances may well have featured.

Today's passage from Matthew's gospel begins with Jesus receiving the news of John's death. John was his cousin and had played an important role in heralding Jesus' arrival. As is the case when you receive the news that someone close to you has died, Jesus must have been deeply saddened, particularly on learning of the circumstances. It's therefore entirely understandable that he should want some breathing space away from the crowds, away from the disciples even, time on his own to remember John, to grieve his loss and to seek comfort from his heavenly Father.

But it isn't to be. Someone saw him and word got around. Soon, a lot of people from the nearby villages walked around the lake to where he was and were waiting for him as his boat landed. We read that when he saw them coming, he was overcome with pity and healed their sick. We don't know how long he spent ministering to the sick but it's soon evening and the disciples come to Jesus with a problem. It's late, the people are hungry – who will feed them? They're in a remote place and there's nowhere for anyone to buy food. *'Send the crowds away,'* the disciples tell Jesus. *'Send them away so that they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves.'* But Jesus doesn't agree – *'You give them something to eat,'* he replies. *'They don't need to go away.'*

Rightly, the disciples object that they have barely enough for their own needs – just five loaves and two fish. That won't go far! So, by an amazing miracle Jesus

feeds the crowds so that the disciples will learn what real compassion looks like. Although the miracle is Jesus' doing, the disciples are invited to play their part by making the seating arrangements, distributing the food and clearing up afterwards. Astonishingly, five loaves and two fish had become a banquet for 5000 men and unnumbered women and children, with more left over for the disciples that they had started with. The people were hungry and through a miracle Jesus fed them, demonstrating not only his compassion on their needs but God's passionate interest in his peoples' everyday activities.

Prior to my annual leave, I took part in a couple of online leadership events. One of these was led by CPAS (the Church Pastoral Aid Society) who are ahead of the game in leadership training for church leaders. At a time of unprecedented change, church leaders are being encouraged to think about how churches can make the most of the missional opportunities open to us. When the country entered lockdown in March and churches closed, services quickly moved online. Whilst many churches, our own included, had already been thinking about what our future online presence should look like, lockdown propelled us into the digital world at a speed we weren't quite expecting. We very quickly had to get used to preparing a service much earlier in the week, providing sufficient time for filming, sourcing and creating music, editing and uploading to the Internet in time for Sunday. New skills had to be acquired and honed, all in a very short space of time. But with a very interesting result.

Most churches going online have discovered that far more people are accessing their services than ever came to their building. What seemed to be initially a devastating blow to churches may actually have led to growth. And we are seeing that here at All Saints. Our weekly online service gets an average of 80 views, with some services receiving over 100. As some views will be a couple or a family, each service may well have been watched by 150 people, far more than we'd see at church on a Sunday morning prior to lockdown. Church members are sharing the service with friends and family, some as far away as the States, and I'm receiving feedback that people who were previously only loosely connected with the church are watching and appreciating services. As people can choose their own time to watch the service, from the comfort of their own sofa, many who found coming to church on a Sunday morning difficult for all number of reasons, are now able to engage with faith in a way they couldn't before.

CPAS estimate that an average 30% extra people now regard themselves as part of their local church through accessing church online. And a recent report – the Church Covid Survey – has revealed that the pandemic has led more people to search for answers to life’s big questions. There are more people searching for prayer, for church, for Jesus, for buying Bibles. People are looking for something more in this moment and many have turned to the church. Amazingly, a quarter (24%) of UK adults say they have watched or listened to a religious service on the Internet or TV since lockdown.

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Over this summer Church leaders are being encouraged to think with their members about what church will look like, in what’s being called the *‘new normal’*. Coming out of lockdown is certainly harder than going into it and, quite rightly, we’ve had to undertake risk assessments and extensive planning before re-opening for worship, all in the context of continuing uncertainty. We know that it’s unlikely that we will return to how things were before lockdown so we’re being encouraged to explore new possibilities. How do we build stronger relationships with those who only engage with church online? How do we re-engage members of our regular church family who haven’t watched anything online during lockdown? How do we reach those in our communities who may want to explore some of those big questions about faith, life and God? And what about our faithful older church members who don’t have access to the Internet and who may well be reticent about safely returning to church for a very long time? How do we meet *their* needs and support them in their relationship with God?

So, here’s how you can help in the next few months. There are three things I’d like to invite you to do: *pray, think* and *communicate*. Firstly, please pray about what God wants to do in the communities of Cottenham and Rampton. God is passionately interested in our everyday activities in the world he created and we are never alone as Christians. Secondly, think about your own needs and how these could be met going forwards, but also how we can meet the needs of those on the edge of church. And thirdly, communicate with other church members. Start a conversation with someone else about what the *‘new normal’* could look like, chat with others and email me or write to me with your ideas.

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'You give them something to eat,' Jesus replied. 'They do not need to go away.'

Telling people about Jesus and growing the Church is the responsibility of us all. We believe in a God of miracles, who can multiply our human efforts to extraordinary proportion. The Bible is full of examples of God working through his people to bring about change. Whilst the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 was Jesus' doing, remember that the disciples were invited to play their part. And so I invite you to play your part in the weeks and months ahead. To pray, to think and to communicate. And may we all grow in faith and reach out to others with the Good News of Jesus in new and exciting ways. Amen.