

Matthew 14 13-21 (Isa 55 1-5 & Rom 9 1-5) St M & AA 02/08/20



“They need not go away; you give them something to eat.”

May I Speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning's Gospel is a favorite of mine so it's a real treat. It is a passage that at first has a sad beginning but it goes on to be both challenging and uplifting and reminds us of the marvelous awesomeness of God. This passage however starts a bit awkwardly; **“Now when Jesus heard this he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.”** The news that made Jesus withdraw was that John the Baptist was dead.

Death can bring out many reactions in people, and everyone finds their own way of dealing with it influenced by both customary sociological differences and also by the level of closeness of the individual to our lives. It's very natural, when someone we love or care about dies, to want to spend some time on our own. This gives us the space to grieve in our own way, remember how Jesus wept at the death of his friend Lazarus. Time alone helps us to remember the person, to reflect on the influence of that person on our lives, and to address how the loss of this person impacts on both our present and future.

John's death has great significance for Jesus as unbeknown to his disciples John's death foreshadows His own. Jesus withdraws to spend time in solitude but it's not long before He returns to shore. He does not dwell too long on his grief as He now knows He must return and minister to those around him as He was called to do. However in what follows there is a shift of emphasis.

We are told, **“When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick”**. **Jesus had compassion on them.** On other occasions that Jesus healed the sick or performed miracles, some were as signs to His identity, others were to teach

important truths but in this reading we are told that it is **Jesus' compassion** that leads him to heal the sick.

When something distressing happens to someone there is very often a period of bereavement, though more commonly associated with the death of a loved one, a sense of bereavement can also be felt at the loss of employment, a broken relationships etc, much of what we have all been experiencing during the lockdown is a bereavement of life as it was. In any of these circumstances it can be difficult to know what to say, but somehow we muddle our way through in some shape or other. To sympathise is to share in the distress or suffering or to commiserate. But to have compassion is not only to have a sympathetic consciousness of another's distress but also to have a desire to alleviate it. Very often though, no matter how much we would like to help, we often hold back because we feel our words or actions are inadequate or of little use for the situation. Or that we might say the wrong thing and upset things further or even that we don't want event's to impact too much on us, so we try to keep things at arms length.

But for Jesus, he knew that the death of John was to have a direct effect on his future. Jesus' compassion knowing that his time was now limited not only focused on healing but also to putting things in place for when he was no longer with them. When the disciples suggested that he sent the crowds away as it was late and there was no food, Jesus replied **"They need not go away; you give them something to eat."** In saying this, Jesus is beginning to prepare the disciples for leadership.

Just as we can feel inadequate so too did the disciples, as they respond; **"We have nothing here but five loaves and two fishes."** Clearly this would seem insufficient to feed the gathered crowd, however in Jesus' hands it became more than enough. Jesus is teaching the disciples and concomitantly us, that no matter how meagre our contribution may seem, whether it is; a talent, or time, or resources, no matter how small, it should be offered, because in the compassion of Christ it will be multiplied beyond our understanding.

In our reading from Isaiah we have an echo of the previous weeks readings **'Listen carefully..... Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.'** In a monetary world to do as instructed **'Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price'** seems ludicrous,

but remember we are not of this world. Here we are been told **'Come'**. **'Come'** and we will be freely given. **'Come'** and we will freely receive because there is no price for us, the price, the cost, has been paid by Christ himself.

There is also however a cautionary point, **'Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?'** What does this actually mean?

Well it's about need and need in God's kingdom is about the need of the other. At the death of John, Jesus took himself away he needed time, but he soon returns to the need of others.

So practically how does this work out. Well if you bear with me I can give you a true example. A university chaplain who oversaw an active Christian presence was approached by a local church. The priest of this church approached the chaplain with a very generous funding proposition for the campus activities. The payback for this was put simply; 'All we are asking is that you teach a Sunday school class for young people. This was agreed and along with the chaplain 25 students also attended the church.

All seemed well until the chaplain received a phone call from the priest saying there was a problem in that 'Your students are not attending our worship service. They come to your class and then either go to other churches or go home.....If you do not get the students to come to our worship then we are removing the funding.' When the chaplain asked the students why they were not staying for the worship they all said the same thing. 'It's boring. There's no one under fifty and no one talks to us. So we stopped going.'

The following year another local church got in touch with the university chaplain and said they had been praying about how they could help the local community, they felt called towards the student community but weren't sure how to help as they had no money to give. The chaplain met with them and said firstly on a Sunday students wanted something to eat as the usual places were often closed, and they couldn't afford many places. The church said they were good at food. Secondly the students often missed their families and needed to feel loved and welcome. The church said we like people and are good at making people feel at home.

The chaplain said that's about it really. The church however were worried that they had no guitars or worship band, just an organ and small elderly choir that sings hymns. The chaplain said I don't think it matters what the worship is like, they just need to be included and be welcome. The chaplain attended along with the student's, all were hugged at the door. Clearly pre Covid!!!!!! The service was traditional and afterwards they joined together with a casserole and fruit jelly. A relationship which lasts to this day!

What the difference was in the two communities was that the first was self focussed and sent them away, where as the second was other focused, they with the little they had to offer were prepared to nurture, to feed, to care.

Sympathy though well meant is nothing to those in need, the starving, the rejected, the lonely, the bereaved in comparison to the world of compassion, because compassion requires in fact demands action. It's all too easy to sympathise and allow the fire of passion to be extinguished by standing by and saying nothing when we believe something is wrong or unjust! It's all too easy to hold back from the giving of ourselves, to turn others away just because we feel inadequate. It is all too easy to look at the little we have, five loaves, two fish.... but trust in Jesus, for **'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. And all ate and were filled...'**

As we move forward through the covid pandemic, living our daily lives and our church lives in new ways, many of us I know are worried about what we have lost, and what little we may have to offer going forward. Today's lesson is however a timely reminder of where our focus needs to be. So we need to listen to where God is leading us. Come before the awesomeness of God with all of our perceived inadequacies so that he can transform them beyond our understanding. Let compassion lead us in our dealings with those around us, and trust in God so we too will be able to **".. give them something to eat"**!

Amen.