

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 2nd August 2020
8th Sunday after Trinity

Collect

Lord God,
your Son left the riches of heaven
and became poor for our sake:
when we prosper save us from pride,
when we are needy save us from despair,
that we may trust in you alone;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Isaiah 55:1-5

Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.
See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.
See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you.

Matthew 14:13-21

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. 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; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Sermon

I wonder if you have ever had the experience of going on a training course and learning a new skill. Perhaps something about handling conflict, or managing difficult situations. And then you've returned to the office, ready to try out all that you've learnt, yet somehow the conversation runs away with you. The responses being given aren't the ones that you'd practised so carefully on the training course. And you realise that you're no further forward than you were before going on the course.

Or maybe you've been involved in an inspiring Away Day, discussing big picture issues for your organisation – or dare I say even the church. You have been fired up by visionary ideas. The conversations have been full of enthusiasm and possibility. Yet somehow everything that seemed so exciting while you were away from the office somehow fizzles on your return. It feels as though all the possibility turns into carrying on as normal.

It's a challenge to us all, isn't it? The balance between vision, possibility and inspiration on the one hand; and reality on the other. It's not that vision, possibility and inspiration aren't real. But somehow they often feel as though they are in tension with the world as we experience it. One of the things that has been so helpful about my Masters course is the way it is so firmly grounded in reality. Each essay that I have written has been two thirds theory and one third practice. Which means that everything we have been discussing in lectures and seminars has had to be relevant to the contexts in which we live and work. It's been a course based on what really works.

And yet Jesus has more to say on the matter. Just listen to the familiar story in this morning's gospel reading, the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus refuses to be constrained by what has worked in the past because he sees with eyes focused on the Kingdom of God.

You see the disciples aren't being unkind when they suggest that the crowd should be sent away. They are being thoughtful. It's late, and they know that they will need something to eat before they get some sleep. The disciples know how inspiring it is to be in Jesus's presence, and assume that unless Jesus actually dismisses them, they will stay, anxious not to miss anything that Jesus might have to say.

And Jesus sees things differently. He sees the possibility that comes from a Kingdom focus. Jesus doesn't just see five loaves and two fish, inadequate for feeding such a large crowd. He sees with eyes of abundance. He sees a world in which there is enough for everyone to eat. A world in which everyone can have enough, if only others aren't greedy and selfish. And he also sees a world in which what we think we own doesn't really belong to us, but is actually God's.

The vision that Jesus offers is so wildly counter-intuitive because it challenges so much that we have been taught. So many of the ways that we have come to live. And yet if we are truly to follow Jesus, we need to allow ourselves to be challenged by what it really means to have our eyes fixed on God's kingdom.

Perhaps a good place to start is by looking at what Jesus says and does in the story in front of us. The first thing that we discover is that he has gone off to a deserted place. Often we read about Jesus climbing a mountain to pray, and maybe that was also what he hoped to do in the deserted place – spend some time in the presence of his father, reconnecting and realigning his will to that of his

father. I guess that's probably a good place for us all to start. And I quite like the fact that he gets interrupted, too, because I think it's something we can all relate to. It's a balance, isn't it? We know that we need to spend time with God, and of course we also need to spend time with the people who value our presence. We probably don't always get the balance right – and I wonder whether Jesus felt like that, too, sometimes. But spending time in prayer is a pretty good starting point in life.

When Jesus is interrupted, we hear that he has compassion. We hear that word a lot about Jesus, and as I never tire of reminding us, what it actually means is "to suffer with". When Jesus has compassion on the crowd it is because he really understands what it is that they are feeling. He places himself into their shoes, and is prepared to share their pain. Once again, compassion is not a bad place to start in our relationships with other people. Just imagine for a moment if all the people of the world were genuinely prepared to look at one another with compassion. It strikes me that it would be transformative. Compassion leads Jesus to cure the sick. He doesn't ask whether they deserve it. He just cures.

Jesus's next words are in response to the disciples' suggestion that he sends the people away to buy food in the neighbouring towns. He claims that they need not go away, but rather that the disciples should give them something to eat. There is no logical explanation for what happens next. What we do know is that it is motivated by compassion. And we also know that Jesus's eyes are fixed firmly on God. He looks up to heaven; he blesses the bread; and he breaks it. And when it is handed out, there is enough for everyone. Not only that, but there is some left over.

We follow a God who will not be constrained by what it is that we can explain. Who refuses to fit into our conventional ways of acting and of organising the world. We follow a God who sees abundance where we tend to see scarcity. Who knows that there is enough for everyone, and longs for us to see that, too. We follow a God who looks at us – each of us, in our frailty and human weakness – with compassion.

God doesn't need us to see things this way to love us. And God loves us enough to believe that one day we may come to see things this way. That one day we will share God's vision of compassion, love and abundance. And God knows, too, that each time we take a small step in that direction is a moment to rejoice in. The disciples are such wonderful examples to us, because they fail and succeed in equal measure. And yet they keep on trying. Picking themselves up, dusting themselves off, and following in Jesus's footsteps once more.

May each of us do the same.

Amen