**Morning Worship, 10.30 am, Sunday 2 August 2020**

**Compassionate Action**

**Call to worship**

Come for the water of refreshment all who are thirsty.

Come hear the word of God all who yearn for life.

Come and be blessed by the God who loves faithfully and eternally.

Come and be fed by Jesus Christ, our friend and redeemer.

**Hymn 153 “Break thou the bread of life”**

Break thou the bread of life,
O Lord, to me,
as thou didst break the loaves
beside the sea.
Beyond the sacred page
I seek thee Lord;
my spirit longs for thee,
O living Word!

Thou art the Bread of Life,
O Lord, to me,
thy holy word the truth
that saveth me;
give me to eat and live
with thee above;
teach me to love thy truth,
for thou art love.

O send thy Spirit Lord,
now unto me,
that he may touch my eyes,
and make me see;
show me the truth concealed
within thy word,
and in thy book revealed
I see the Lord.

**A prayer of approach**

Lord Jesus, your heart went out to the crowd when you saw their need.

We bring to you this morning our hunger, our longing for healing,

our yearning to understand the Scriptures and to hear you speak to us. Meet us in our homes.

Embrace us, receive our praise and the best of all we can offer.

Strengthen us individually and together, that we might reflect your compassion

reaching out to those places and those people who are hurting, and sad, and lonely.

We pray in your precious name. **Amen.**

**A prayer of confession**

God of abundance, forgive us when we send others away to buy what we could give;

forgive us when we are afraid to offer our resources because they feel too meagre,

or we are worried that there won’t be enough left for us.

Forgive us, and bless us with your compassion and your generosity. **Amen.**

**Reading:** Matthew 14: 13-21

**Sermon: Compassionate action**

**Introduction**

Four elderly churchgoers died and each in turn met St Peter at the Pearly Gates. The first to arrive, a Roman Catholic, was asked, “What did you bring”. “A rosary” he said. “Good”, said Peter, “you are welcome in”.

Then along came the Anglican. “What have you brought” said Peter. “A Prayer Book” was the reply. “You too are welcome”. The it was the turn of the Baptist, who, in answer to Peter’s question replied, “a Bible”, and was given a warm welcome. Finally, the Methodist reached the Pearly Gates and to St Peter’s question came the answer “I’ve brought a casserole!”

We Methodist are good on meals – shared meals, harvest suppers, faith picnics…. And it’s not because are less spiritual or pious than Christians of other traditions. The gospels are full of references to meals that Jesus enjoyed and many of his parables involve banquets and feasts.

1. **The feeding of the five thousand as told by Matthew (14:13-21)**

I have preached or heard countless sermons on this story. I know that you too will have heard many as well. What more can be said, you might ask. Well it is a highly significant passage recorded with some differences in all four gospels. But as with all scriptural passages we must look at the context, how those who were there responded, how those who first heard this passage read were challenged by it and how God is speaking to us as we hear it, and reflect and think about it.

1. **The context**

Matthew’s account of the feeding of 5,000 begins with Jesus withdrawing on the news of John’s death. Is he seeking solace in the wilderness, taking stock of his movement now John has gone, or getting out of Herod’s way? Whatever the reason, this story has a profoundly political location, beginning with the empire acting against Jesus’ movement, and ending with the feeding of an army in the wilderness. In between these brackets we are treated to a story of compassion in action, of the lavish grace of a God who loves and provides for all.

1. **The crowds**

The crowds followed Jesus, and his response was to meet their needs. The disciples – maybe keen to ensure that they could meet Jesus’ need – want to send the crowds away. But Jesus challenges them to meet the crowd’s need for food (v.16). Rightly the disciples object that they have barely enough for their own needs (v.17). So, Jesus feeds the crowds so that the disciples will learn what compassion looks like, just as much as because they all needed an evening meal.

 **4. The disciples**

Although the miracle is of Jesus’s doing, the disciples are invited to play their part by making the seating arrangements, distributing the food and clearing up afterwards. Amazingly, five loaves and two fish had become a banquet for 5,000 men and unnumbered women and children, with more left over for the disciples than they had started with.

 **5. Those who first heard Matthew’s gospel read**

Two strong resonances in the story should not be missed. The first is the reminder of how God provided manna in the wilderness. Matthew does not labour this, but the fact that he describes the place as a wilderness suggests that he has the wanderings of the people under Moses in mind. And the fact that the crowds are looking to Jesus for leadership suggests that they see him as a new Moses.

The other resonance is the strong echo of Holy Communion in the language of verse 19b. Of course, no one in the crowds or the disciples would have got this, but we do – because we are reading this story after the Last Supper became the central celebratory meal of the Christian tradition. And with this, there is a strong echo of the messianic banquet of Isaiah chapter 25: here God’s people feast in celebration of the coming of his kingdom and their place in it.

There is one other echo that is worth noting. The story immediately before this one was set in a lavish banquet presided over by a self-aggrandising empire builder (Herod). Here we have the opposite: another king, generously providing for all those who look to him for guidance and leadership in a kingdom of grace and welcome.

 **6. Finally what is God saying to us.**

As soon as Jesus landed on the shore and saw a large crowd, we read v 14 “he had compassion on them and healed the sick” NIV or “his heart was filled with pity” GNB or simply “his heart went out to them” REV. This comment tells us so much about Jesus, but it tells us how we called to address the needs we see around us. Jesus expects his disciples to do something about the immediate needs, “You yourselves give them something to eat” v16.

This terrible pandemic has thrown a light on many of the heroic efforts of so many to combat and mitigate its devastating effects and I am speaking particularly of health and social care staff, for some at the cost of their family life, health and even their lives. But it has also revealed, if we didn’t know it already, that there are far too many whose needs are desperate. Children growing up in households with little or no income.

Some have asked where is the church in all this. Well many churches and other places of worship are being used as food collection and distribution centres. In some Sikh temples vast numbers of meals are being cooked and sent out to those in need to give one particular example.

In the so called new normal of life after Covid, Christians, along with other likeminded people, need to lobby and campaign to address the issues of inequality and injustice that are more apparent than ever in Britain let alone in the rest of the world.

In John’s gospel in the same chapter as the account of the feeding of the five thousand Jesus tells the crowd “I am the bread of life. Those who come to me will never be hungry; those who believe in me will never be thirsty” John 6 35. There’s the challenge Jesus presents “you yourselves give them something to eat”, it is none other than Jesus the bread of life.

**Intercessions**

**A prayer of praise and petition**

We praise you, Lord Jesus, for those who have been inspired by your life of giving and healing,

especially those who have suffered and those who are persecuted or laughed at.

Hear our prayer now, for those who feed the hungry, for those who minister to the hungry and despairing,

for those who share the gospel message of giving and generosity.

Encourage, strengthen and protect them, we pray. **Amen.**

**The Lord’s Prayer**

**Hymn 125 “Praise and thanksgiving”**

1 Praise and thanksgiving, Father, we offer,

 for all things living, you have made good.

 Harvest of sown fields, fruits of the orchard,

 hay from the mown fields, blossom and wood.

 2 Lord, bless the labour, we bring to serve you,

 that with our neighbour, we may be fed.

 Sowing or tilling, we would work with you;

 harvesting, milling, for daily bread.

 3 Father, providing, food for your children,

 your wisdom guiding, teaches us share

 one with another, so that rejoicing

 sister and brother, may know your care.

 4 Then will thy blessing, reach every people;

 each one confessing, your gracious hand.

 When you are reigning, no one will hunger,

 your love sustaining; fruitful the land.

**A prayer of blessing**

Bless to us the past, that it may be a source of story to improve us.

Bless to us the future that it may be source of promise to enliven us.

Bless to us the present, that it may be a source of joy to encourage us.

Bless us to one another for the coming of God's kingdom in peace, love and justice.

Bless us to those we encounter in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**