

Sermon on Matthew 14.13-21: Loaves and fishes

'When Jesus heard this he withdrew from there in a boat to a lonely place apart' ...

I can really relate to that! I can relate to that feeling of enough is enough. Stop the world and let me get off!

It sounds like I need a break doesn't it!

Well I am taking a weeks holiday from tomorrow. I don't want to sound too pleased about that but inwardly I am grinning like a Cheshire Cat!

I don't think I have ever felt more in need of a break. Even though I am not going anywhere special, like Jesus i just want to take myself away to a quiet place to be apart. To think, to rest, to be.

Just to spend time at home as we remain in our local quasi - lockdown.

I had not realised how weary I have become...a weariness which does not seem to be cured by sleep, or even with a change of activity or (brief) change of scene. It seems little wonder that this is the case though: we have been living through a pandemic!

And I am not alone by any stretch of the imagination. Many people I speak with over the phone or from a social distance, are tired! Physically tired by the emotional burden we have all been carrying.

Of course we are all experiencing this in different ways, but there is so much that we used to take for granted. Whilst masks, hand-washing, and limiting our travel have become common-place, they are not normalised.

The emotional energy it takes to get ready to go out, especially still in lockdown, is huge. COVID-19 has dealt each of us a significant shock to the system.

I have spoken to a number of people who feel weary of this new normal - which is quite far from 'normal normal!'

Navigating life within it, whilst also being aware of what can be gained from living more simply, and indeed the great costs that have come hand in hand with it, is exhausting.

I have become aware over the last months that much of what I seem to do, or think about, relates to the future.

At present, I feel quite immobilised; it seems impossible to think too far ahead!

Just as we began too, we've found ourselves plunged into a local lockdown, in a way which hits harder because we dared to begin to move forward.

In the meantime though, I recognise the need for each of us to be kind to ourselves as life fails to feel nearly normal, and navigation of the new normal continues to use too much of our reserves.

Jesus had times when he felt emotional battered by the sheer pace of his life and the call on his time and energy.

The gospel writers are very succinct in the details they include and the words they use. That is something to bear in mind when reading a passage from scripture.

Especially when something is repeated within a short space of time. The words 'a lonely space' are mentioned twice within the space of three verses. That is not a coincidence.

Throughout the whole of the scriptures we find extraordinary things happening in 'lonely places'. Both physical and metaphorical.

The feeding of the 5000 recalls the ministry of Moses and the feeding of the Israelites during their wanderings in the desert.

Elijah encountered God in the silence when he was hiding in a cave in desperation, as he fled for his life.

God is in those lonely places we find ourselves in or we are drawn to. It's in a lonely place that Jesus fed the people both spiritually and also physically. Nurturing them in body and spirit.

Maybe the time spent in those lonely places when we feel most vulnerable and lost, when our resources that normally get us through life seem most scarce we are able to find a space where we also discover stillness, silence and our need for God.

In our passage from Matthew we hear the disciples wanting to send the people away from this lonely space to find food elsewhere. They mean no harm, they were simply being practical.

Night was falling, they were out in the middle of nowhere, and their stomachs were beginning to growl. It was time to call it a day, time to build a campfire and eat the little bit of food that they had brought with them.

It was time to take care of themselves for a change, and to suggest that everyone else do the same thing.

But Jesus had a better idea.

'They need not go away' he said seeming to know that what the crowd needed more than a hot meal was to stay together, seeming to know that there was more nourishment for them in each other company'

Sometimes when we are struggling and feeling vulnerable, its not what we eat but who we eat it with that is more important.

'You give them something to eat.' Jesus says to his disciples.

I wish I had been there. I wish I could have seen how they looked at each other when he said that.

Jesus may not have been making much sense, but then again he may have had a sense of the situation that went beyond the disciples common sense.

The disciples were operating out of a sense of scarcity. They looked at the crowd and saw no picnic baskets or backpacks, and assumed that no one had anything to eat.

But Jesus operated out of a different set of assumptions. If the disciples operated out of a sense of scarcity, then what Jesus operated out of what was a sense of plenty.

He looked at the same thing the disciples looked at, and saw potential and possibilities.

We can get hooked on the miracles and wonder how they actually happened. Try to work out the mechanics. But that would be to miss the point.

The problem with miracles is that we tend to get mesmerised by them. Miracles let us off the hook. We do not have enough of what it takes to turn things round so we hand it over to God to sort out and we wait for the miracle.

But God says, "You have resources however limited. Use what you have been blessed with. Stop waiting for a miracle and participate in one instead."

This miracle didn't happen in the middle of the temple in Jerusalem but in a lonely place where people were tired and hungry. Maybe even in our lonely spaces with our depleted resources, we too will be able to participate in everyday miracles.

Miracles do happen, they start one person at a time. They happen everyday all around you. Open your eyes and see!

Our key workers going the extra mile to try and keep things as normal as possible.

A tired and overworked parent patiently trying to get their children to eat vegetables... now there is miracle in the making there...

During the last 4 months there have been miracles happening everywhere... stories of people choosing to share and care with neighbours, family and strangers.

Last night I listened to the final choir rehearsal before their August break. They met in their socially distanced bubbles to sing the hymn 'Abide with me' outside in the churchyard.

As they sang I felt the emotional weight of the last 4 months wash over me.

I realised just how much we have lost in the last 4 months. The sacrifices that we have all made. How much we took for granted.

It felt standing there and just listening to singing ringing out over the countryside that we could catch a glimpse of hope for a better future to come.

Through the wonderful words of the hymn I was reminded that though things seem to have changed beyond all recognition, we can hold onto the hope we have in a God who is changeless. Whose love is constant.

That God is with us in this strange and challenging lonely place but not only that...

God will inspire us to grow and be creative and move us forward using what we have already been given. To see through the eyes of plenty that is all around us.

Maybe the miracle will be that ...

When this over

may we never again

take for granted

A handshake with a stranger

Conversations with neighbours

A crowded theatre

Nights out with friends

The taste of communion

A routine check up

Coffee with a friend

The stadium roaring

Life itself.

When this ends,

may we find
that we have become
more like the people
we wanted to be
we were called to be
we hoped to be
and may we stay
that way— better
for each other
because of the worst.
Because of the lonely places this pandemic has taken us too.

Amen.