

Homily for the 8th Sunday of Trinity (2 August 2020)
St Andrew's Headington – Mtr Jenn

“When Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.”
–Matthew 14.13

Over the last week, I've been surveying my students for tips on how to hold their attention for a 50-minute lecture online. Knowing how difficult it can be to sit through a 10-minute sermon online – not like sermons at St Andrew's, of course – a 50-minute lecture sounds impossible. And they confessed to me their approach: they *don't* listen to a 50-minute lecture online. Rather, they speed up the audio to double, even triple time, and get the lecture over in 15-20 minutes. I'll admit I didn't even know this was possible (nor do I want to think about what we all sound like triple speed!)...and yet, such an approach is not surprising since it fits with how we deal with many things in life. We speed them up and we skip the difficult bits. And whether we know it or not, we do it with this morning's gospel.

If we were asked to recount the gospel for this morning, we'd likely say that it's the story of the feeding of thousands by Jesus. And we wouldn't be wrong. But by fast forwarding to the story of the miracle, we miss the introduction: “Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.” Jesus clearly heard something that led him to withdraw – and this is the bit we often miss.

For right before the feeding of the thousands, Jesus is told that his cousin John – the prophet who prepares the way for him, the one who baptises him – has been beheaded. John's disciples immediately tell Jesus and today's gospel begins at that point when Jesus then gets into a boat to get away. Whether this isolation stems from grief or fear or the need for prayer or for rest, we aren't told.

What we do know is that the crowds follow him. Jesus is trying to deal with tragic news, he is grieving, he longs to be left alone, and people keep demanding things from him. But instead of getting angry with them or resentful of them for disrupting his isolation, we are told that Jesus has compassion for them. And this is essential to grasp. Miracles are wonderful things, don't get me wrong, but the point of this story isn't necessarily *what* Jesus does, but *why*. Jesus doesn't heal the sick and welcome all and feed those who are hungry because he is better than them in their suffering. Jesus heals and welcomes and feeds because he has compassion – a word which simply means 'to suffer with'. Jesus suffers with them. They bring their hopes, their hurts, their needs to Jesus and in the midst of his own hopes and hurts and needs he is present with them, he heals them, he feeds them, he loves them.

And yet before we let the story get all soppy, the disciples jolt us back to reality. Because while Jesus might not be annoyed by the crowd, they are. They want Jesus to send the crowd away. They want the crowd to figure out how to fend for themselves. But Jesus turns the tables on them. For not only does he *not* send away those who seek him, he tells the disciples that *they* need to feed them. And so reluctantly, they gather what they have, offer it to Jesus, and he takes this offering, blesses it, and all are filled. Jesus turns their doubt and self-focus into abundance. He uses his own reluctant and sceptical disciples to care for all those whom God loves.

And thus within this story – of grief, compassion, doubt, and abundance – we find both an invitation and a promise. We find a very realistic invitation to prayer and we find an overwhelming promise that God cares deeply for us and for our suffering world.

The invitation to prayer jumps out to us from the very first words of this story. Jesus receives some tragic news and he seeks a deserted place. In Mark's gospel, he goes to this deserted place to pray. But his quiet is interrupted and his prayer doesn't go as planned. Even at the best of times when we aren't grieving – and who at this moment isn't grieving something – our lives are overwhelming, demanding, and distracting. As this gospel makes clear, when we do finally claim some space with God in our day, the outside world doesn't go away. Certainly it would be nice if we always operated out of a place of quiet prayer and calmness with a constant focus on God, but the reality is that this is impossible much of the time.

And yet the example of Jesus challenges us and invites us to prayer in our broken, distracting, demanding world. How will you, how do you, carve out space for God each day – whether to read Scripture or pray one of the church's offices like Morning Prayer or to hold before God those you carry on your heart? How might you do this, knowing that you won't do it perfectly and that you will, many days, be interrupted? Because such interruption can lead us either never to try to find such space, or to embrace the interruption and try to find God there.

Certainly, Jesus' disciples *are* anxious at such interruptions. But instead of scolding them and instead of telling them to go away until they are more focused and less anxious, Jesus invites them – all who follow him – to be a part of the miracle, challenges them to be a part of the comfort he offers, and takes and blesses their efforts so that they might be a gift for others. And this includes us. For the needs that Jesus encountered are still with us today. People are still sick and hungry and longing for something, anything, to offer hope and the assurance that they are not suffering alone.

How might we, with Jesus' disciples, refocus our anxieties in our prayers and in our actions? How might we not just complain about the problems of the world around us but trust in God's promise to be with us in those challenges? And what might we offer for God to bless, even from the isolation of our homes, trusting God to transform our offering and use our gifts? In his grief and his longing, God knows our grief and our longing, and he loves us and suffers with us. May such a reality give us sustenance in the week ahead, that we may not only be filled but may also offer such love and compassion to our suffering world.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.