

Sunday Service August 2nd 2020 led by Philip Rice
Jesus feeds the five thousand

Call to Worship - Psalm 145:18-21

¹⁸The Lord is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.

¹⁹He fulfils the desires of those who fear him;
he hears their cry and saves them.

²⁰The Lord watches over all who love him,
but all the wicked he will destroy.

²¹My mouth will speak in praise of the Lord.
Let every creature praise his holy name
for ever and ever.

Hymn

There's a quiet understanding
when we're gathered in the Spirit,
it's a promise that he gives us
when we gather in his name.
There's a love we feel in Jesus,
there's a mamma that he feeds us,
it's a promise that he gives us
when we gather in his name.

And we know when we're together,
sharing love and understanding,
that our brothers and our sisters
feel the oneness that he brings.
Thank you, thank you, thank you, Jesus
for the way you love and feed us,
for the many ways you lead us,
thank you, thank you, Lord.
Thank you, thank you, Lord.
Thank you, thank you, Lord.

Words & music: Tedd Smith
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Prayers

God of great mystery, deeper than our utmost comprehension, threefold Lord, our God, we worship and adore you.
We worship and adore you, for the wonder that out of the dust of stars you have created us.
We worship and adore you for the wonder that out of your love for us you have come in Jesus for our salvation.
We worship and adore you for the wonder that in order that we might be enabled, you have come to us in your Holy Spirit.

Almighty God, the wonder of your creation has been held cheap and, Lord, we confess with shame that we have sinned against you in our failure to value your creation aright.
Lord, have mercy. **Lord, have mercy.**

And Lord, we confess that we have sinned against you by ignoring the meaning of Christ for our salvation.
Lord, have mercy. **Lord, have mercy.**

And we confess, Lord, with shame, that we have sinned against you in the poor worth we have attached to your Holy Spirit.
Lord, have mercy. **Lord, have mercy.**

God of truth and love, be merciful to us, as we claim your promised forgiveness, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
God, who is faithful and just, assures us of pardon and peace.
Amen. Thanks be to God.

Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven
Hallowed be your name
your Kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the Kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen

Reading Matthew 14:13-21

Jesus feeds the five thousand

¹³ When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed those who were ill.

¹⁵ As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so that they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.'

¹⁶ Jesus replied, 'They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.'

¹⁷ 'We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,' they answered.

¹⁸ 'Bring them here to me,' he said. ¹⁹ And he told the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. ²⁰ They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. ²¹ The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Sermon

5,000 is a lot of people to be in a remote place. Actually, Matthew tells us there were "5,000 men, besides women & children", so the total number could be vastly more than that. The mental picture I had of Galilee was of a quiet, rural area, with small settlements around the huge lake – the Sea of Galilee. So where did 5,000 men & their families come from? Historical records actually show that the area known as Galilee was about 50 miles N/S by 25 miles E/W and that, within that small area there were 204 settlements (towns & villages), each of which had populations of at least 15,000. So contrary to what I had thought, Galilee was quite a densely populated area. So when we read, at the beginning of the passage, that Jesus withdrew to a solitary place, we can begin to realise just how difficult that probably was.

Jesus, in his humanity, had the same emotions as you & I, so when he heard what had happened to John the Baptist, he quite naturally wanted some time alone, some peace and quiet. John was his cousin – there was family grief. John was also a prophet with a ministry not unlike that of Jesus. What happened to John was a cold reminder of what was ahead for Jesus, but also a warning to take care, for he still had work to do and didn't want to share John's fate before his time.

And so he set off with his disciples to a quiet place, on the other side of the lake, where it should have been quieter, to think and to pray, to seek new strength and invigoration from his Father. But people wanted to see and hear Jesus. They wanted healing for their sick, they wanted to hear his life changing words. They could see where he was heading, as he took off in the boat, and quickly set off round the lake on foot. A walk of several miles actually, which gives you some idea how keen they were to be in his presence. And so Jesus was denied the peace and quiet he sought.

Many would have resented this sort of invasion of their privacy. He came there for solitude, to escape the crowd, but they followed him. Many would have told them to go away – he needed his private time – come back later. But not Jesus. Jesus, we're told, "had compassion on them and healed their sick" – in other words, he fulfilled all their demands upon him. But he did even more than that, because when evening came, he also arranged food for them in a most extraordinary way.

Now you all know the story of the feeding of the 5,000, but what I think is interesting is its juxtaposition in Matthew's Gospel (& in Mark's) with the story of John's execution. Let me just remind you of that story. Herod had imprisoned John because of the way he criticised him when he took his own brother's wife. At his birthday party his wife's daughter, danced for the guests and Herod, by way of thanks, offered her anything she cared to ask for. In collusion with her mother, who had also, of course, been upset by John's criticism, the girl asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Herod, not wanting to break his promise before his guests, reluctantly agreed and John was beheaded.

So here we have 2 dramatically different scenes. One, a royal birthday party at King Herod's palace. The other, a hillside on the banks of the Sea of Galilee. 2 quite different meals, with different guests and very different hosts. The contrast between these two events is quite startling and their juxtaposition is perhaps more than just a chronological coincidence.

When Herod had a birthday party, you can imagine that his invited guests would be the wealthy, the powerful and the influential; people Herod needed to keep sweet, needed to keep on the right side of. So who were Jesus's guests? Well, he hadn't actually invited anyone – in fact, he hadn't really intended to have a party – quite the reverse in fact. He simply had compassion for the thousands of people who came to him with their problems. An extraordinary compassion when he could so easily have turned them away. Just ordinary people with very real problems, seeking something special, wanting Jesus to help them. I don't think Herod invited his guests out of compassion. He wasn't so much interested in what he could do for them, as in what they could do for him, or in some cases, he may simply have been keeping them on his side, because he didn't want them as enemies.

But there's more than just compassion that's highlighted as a contrast between these 2 parties. Let's consider the hosts for example. Herod, a King and therefore a man of power and authority, who should have been in control of all he surveyed. Yet he's apparently not in control of events at his own birthday party. Instead, we find him wriggling and squirming to do what will most please his guests and his manipulating wife and step daughter.

Jesus, on the other hand, despite the interruption of his much needed respite, remains totally in control of events as they unfold. The meal for 5,000+ guests may have been unexpected, but Jesus is totally un-phased by this and with a few instructions to his disciples, everything is taken care of. Those who came seeking spiritual nourishment, went away having their physical needs met as an added bonus.

King Herod's party started as a celebration for his birthday, but history shows it as a celebration of all that is bad –

- of vindictiveness, as Herodias takes her revenge against John the Baptist,
- of manipulation and political manoeuvring

The feeding of the 5,000 started not as a celebration, but as people seeking Jesus. What it became is a celebration of all that is good –

- in place of vindictiveness, we have compassion. A celebration of God's boundless compassion for all who seek him. Even his own need for rest doesn't stop Jesus responding to these people.
- in place of manipulation and dishonest manoeuvring, we have a celebration of God's wonderful bounty. Herodias took a simple promise and generous offer by Herod and, with the complicity of her daughter, turned it into an horrendous act of revenge. Jesus, seeing all these people, not only gave them all they asked for, but gave them much more besides. Taking the 5 loaves of bread and two fish he blessed them, which means he gave praise to God for the provision of food, then he multiplied it, so that everyone had as much as he or she needed.

Herod is a king and Jesus is the King of kings and the contrast between the 2 kingdoms could not be more striking. And each of us has the opportunity to choose which kingdom we want to belong to. You may think that Herod's kingdom is unrepresentative of the alternatives to the Kingdom of God. Perhaps you think it's at the opposite extreme. Perhaps you'd be more comfortable to sit somewhere in the middle, without going to either extreme.

Outside God's kingdom, not everyone's like Herod or Herodias, but there are people who manipulate others to get what they want. There are people who are less than straightforward and not always totally honest – "economical with the truth" was the term promoted by the government some years ago, as if it was a good thing. Our present government tried it recently in explaining various 'Cummings' and goings during lockdown. Not everyone's like that, but it seems to me that anyone who tries to steer a straight path through all the politicking of the modern world, without the help and guidance of Jesus, is likely to be like the man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, who you will recall "fell into the hands of robbers".

If, on the other hand, we choose to follow Jesus, we know from this story that he can take control of any situation, even when events are unexpected, even when the situation is not of his making and actually conflicts with his own plans. In fact he turns the event into an absolutely fabulous celebration of God's boundless love and generosity.

The disciples listened to Jesus and did as he instructed. As a result, they became part of a miracle. If we accept God's invitation we will enjoy not only physical and spiritual refreshment but in every sense we'll find life in all its fullness. Why settle for anything less.

The feast of God is ready for the asking. It's free of charge, no money is required. The Lord is ready to feed all who come seeking Jesus. Amen

Hymn

Lord, I come to you,
let my heart be changed, renewed,
flowing from the grace
that I've found in you.

And, Lord, I've come to know
the weaknesses I see in me
will be stripped away
by the power of your love.

*Hold me close,
let your love surround me;
bring me near,
draw me to your side.*

*And as I wait,
I'll rise up like the eagle,*

*and I will soar with you,
your Spirit leads me on
in the power of your love.*

Lord, unveil my eyes,
let me see you face to face,
the knowledge of your love
as you live in me.

Lord, renew my mind,
as your will unfolds in my life
in living every day
in the power of your love.

Hold me close,

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Prayers

God of love, we pray for the life of your Church throughout the world. In the beginning your word subdued the chaos, and in the fullness of time you sent Jesus, your Son, to rebuke the forces of evil and to make all things new. By that same power, transform all our fears into faith, that we may have courage to constantly seek out Jesus and follow in the way of your kingdom. May our lives bubble with energy and zeal, and through your Holy Spirit may we be energised in your service. Renew us by your Spirit as we worship here, that we may be a living fellowship.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

God of mercy, we pray for the life of the world, and for those who exercise earthly power. For those in whom people put their trust as leaders. We remember the people who live in the midst of war, conflict or terror. And, Lord, we thank you for those engaged in seeking ways to bring peace. May they have your clear and humbling Spirit in them. And we pray for those countries struggling to cope with the spreading corona virus, where poverty makes simple hygiene and social distancing impossible. Show us all how to live as members of your human family; to bear each other's burdens and to work together for justice and peace.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

God of compassion, we pray for those who are ill or anxious at home or in hospital We pray for those whose lives are ground down by sickness, in body, mind or spirit. We pray for those who are separated from loved one, we pray for those who are mourning loved ones. Draw near with your saving love. Bring healing and hope, that those for whom our prayers are offered may find help in weakness and have confidence in your loving care. May they be uplifted by your healing presence.

Your kingdom come: **Your will be done.**

Lord, give us peace – peace with you, peace with others, peace with ourselves.
And free us from fear. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Blessing:

Go into God's world in God's name:
Go ever-conscious of the leading of the Holy Spirit;
Go ever-aware of the needs of the world around you;
Go ever-open to new friendship and new opportunity;
Go ever-ready to share what you have found to be true.

And may the ever-loving God surround us with his blessing, as we seek to serve him wherever we go.
In the name of Jesus, who is the world's good news.

Amen