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Introduction

The death of John the Baptist lies between the parables we read last week and the passage upon which we focus this week. There are also hints in the text that significant time has passed, Jesus has gone on a journey to a lonely place, and there has been a lapse of time before the crowds, have left their towns and sought him out. There is a sense of a moment spoilt, a plan gone awry and also of a man and teacher who was ultimately able to be flexible in order to be inclusive. This passage contains one of Jesus' most famous miracles. Take some time to consider the idea of a miracle and your own response to that idea. How we read scripture and approach the ideas in the text makes a big difference to what we see in this story.

Have you ever experienced a miracle? What was it like for you?

Do you doubt miracles? Do they not 'exist' in your experience? Why not?

How do you feel about people of the opposite view? Is one view naive and the other sensible? Is one view soulless or lacking in commitment and the other devoted or intuitive?

Just in the very thought about whether or miracles are 'real' or 'metaphorical' have we split ourselves into two parts of the kingdom? Or is this an issue which is minor in your reading?

Text

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.

Comment

“It is already very late, and this is a lonely place.”

Our focus text this week is not from the words of Jesus but from his disciples. In Matthew's gospel place and belonging are very strong themes. As we thought about the parables we thought about how people belong to God's kingdom and what that kingdom might be like. With this passage instead of focussing on the act of feeding, we shall think about the community which followed Jesus in those early days. Are there some basic assumptions we can make about this group of people? What was the experience of actually following Jesus like?

Twice this passage mentions that it was a 'lonely place'. In the first instance, this is a positive thing, a lovely, lonely haven, a quiet place of safety where Jesus retreated to be free from the crowd and to be at peace. It is important to note the reason why Jesus left. John the Baptist was his cousin, and perhaps his friend, maybe closer to him in his childhood than the disciples were to him at this time, and he had been brutally beheaded. John died, alone, in prison, at the capricious wish of a princess and for the pleasure of a corrupt political administration held at Herod's court.

Jesus, we may assume, needs to be alone, but the crowds follow anyway.

For the disciples this is a difficult judgement call. They intuitively want to protect Jesus – like the doctor's receptionist who protects the doctor from his needy patients, they find him a ready excuse; “It is already very late, and this is a lonely place. Send the people away and let them go to the villages to buy food for themselves.”

The excuses we make, for ourselves and for others, colour our judgement of what is necessary and what is useful. Jesus hears the 'get-out' offered to him, and also the shaking off of responsibility of the disciples on their own part. He refuses to accept their suggestion that he should 'send the people away.'

The idea of a 'lonely place' is turned from a place of refuge to a place which lacks resources. What had been a sought after relief of a grieving heart, becomes a place where people are not able to have their needs met. However, Jesus' solution is not to 'send the people away' but rather to make the lonely place one of community and he does this through his miracle of sharing food. What further thoughts may be brought out of this passage?

'They don't have to leave,' Jesus said. Can you think of situations where the only solution for a lack of resources, of spiritual food, or inclusion, has meant that people feel they had to leave? How did this situation make the people in it feel? Was there a range of responses? Would a sharing of spiritual food have enabled them to share the 'lonely place'?

'Everyone ate and had enough.' What does this short sentence speak of at the moment in your own context? Is it a challenge or a comfort? Is the first instinct to read it metaphorically, there is enough of God's spirit for all, or to read it literally, everyone has enough to eat? How are the disciples now feeling? The baskets of left-overs suggest more than enough, a God who provides more than is required for any given situation – or is it just for this particular story that there is more than enough. Does the shrinking nature of church in the Western world make the people in those

churches less able to understand a God of abundance? Would this be different if those local parish churches were growing?

Response

REFLECTION

'Jesus... looked up to heaven, and gave thanks to God'.

What is the role of thanksgiving in this story? What do you imagine Jesus prayer of thanks to have contained? Was it simply for the food? For the company in his lonely place? For the company he now had in his time of grief? Have you ever been bereaved or lost a relationship which was important to you? How did that feel? Was there a tension in you at that time between wanting to share space with people, and also needing a lonely place now and then? Take some time, not to write your own prayer of thanks, but to imagine for yourself the thanks Jesus might have given.

ACTION

Find a lonely place, either in a picture, poem, song or story, or walk, drive or cycle to somewhere you know. As you are there, in your imagination or physically present, think about loneliness. Does it have negatives and positives? What are they? How do you feel when crowds of people show up in a place you expect to be lonely? Would your instinct be to 'send the people away.?' How easy is it, in our own lives, to share our lonely places, our food, and our personal space with others?

Prayer

Lonely God,
let me walk alone with you
quietly, peacefully, without challenge
or interruption,
be my God, and mine alone.

*But who are these people coming along the path?
Swarming over the beach?
Coming in their boats?
How dare they interrupt
my lonely God
and my space with the divine presence.*

Lonely God,
are you telling me to share?
What is it I must give?
Should I give my precious time alone away?
do you call me to share the inner core

which I find defines me
those things I want to have only
alone and with you.

Lonely God,
let me see the baskets of left-overs
the riches beyond the sharing
the final joy of the excess after the feast
now I see and understand that
alone with my lonely God
I am in the best company.
May I join all those who
follow the lonely God
in heaven and on earth.
Amen