

**Sunday 2nd August 2020 - Reflection**  
**Rev. David Goodall**  
**Matthew 14:13-21 - Feeding of the 5000**

Prayer

It was good to hear earlier those testimonies of God's provision in our lives, stories of those moments when God either directly or through others has provided for us.

If I was to ask you who is the most generous person you know? I wonder who comes to mind? I wonder if it's someone who you know has much and gives much or whether it's someone who has little but still gives much maybe through their time or in small but significant ways. Maybe the person who you think is most generous is the person who reminds you of the story of the widow's mite in Mark 12.

This week I co-chaired a meeting with my colleague Rev. David Glover, the new rector of Hexham Abbey, of a number of community organisations in Hexham where we shared together about the needs we see emerging in Hexham at the moment. It was a meeting that came about through our desire to be a listening church as we emerge from lockdown and a church which is looking outwards as well as inwards. One of the common threads that came up again and again in the meeting was that of generosity and in particular of the generosity of the people of Hexham over the last 4 to 5 months during the period of lockdown. We heard stories of people giving money to the food-bank, of the number of people who'd volunteered to help others, of the people who want to continue to help going forward and many more. There were so many stories of peoples generosity, of people giving more than they had before, of people wanting to love their neighbours.

In our passage today from Matthew 14 we hear the story of the feeding of the 5000, of the feeding of the multitude as it is sometimes called. A story which is full with the generosity and abundance of God. A story in which God's amazing ability to provide for many from the humble offerings of the disciples, or a small boy in some of the versions, is shown. Over the last few weeks in our readings we've heard the parables from Matthew, this week and in the weeks to come we hear some of the miracle stories. Like the parables these miracle stories reveal to us the character and nature of God and encourage us to see how we can reflect those characteristics of God in our own lives.

There are six stories of the feeding of the multitude in the Bible, each of the Gospels record the feeding of the 5000 and then in Matthew 15 and Mark 8 we have the story of the feeding of the 4000, all six accounts are understood by the biblical scholars to be recording the same event. For me they all remind us of the God who in Jesus wants to provide abundantly for God's people and will do many things, miraculous things even to enable that to happen. In the passage there are three phrases that particularly stand out and show us the generous and miraculous nature of God. We'll look briefly at each of them and if you have a bible to hand that might be helpful to you.

Firstly, *'he had compassion on them'*, earlier in chapter 14 we hear recorded the death of John the Baptist and the first verse of the passage today refers to that event. John was Jesus' cousin and therefore like many of us on hearing such tragic news Jesus goes off to be by himself, he withdraws by privately to a solitary place we hear. But the crowd follows him, as verse 14 tells us a large crowd.

When we lived in Darlington we lived 2 minutes drive from Morrisons but it was right opposite one of the churches I served. I soon realised if I want to do the shopping quickly, it was quicker to drive 10 minutes to the other Morrisons because in the one opposite church I saw half the congregation and everyone I knew from the community - which most of the time was lovely but when you just needed to do the shopping quickly it could take 3 times as long as you wanted to!

When you want to be on your own or get something done quickly that's what you want to do isn't it ! You don't want to bump into people, you don't want the phone to ring and you certainly don't want a large crowd to follow!

But what does Jesus do? When he goes to be on his own and is then followed by the large crowd what does he do? Verse 14 tells us he has compassion upon them and healed those who were ill. Jesus sets aside his own needs and shares his generous self giving spirit with the crowd, showing compassion and healing them. The generosity of God is seen here in Jesus, in the one who despite what he needs shows the love grace and compassion of God. I wonder how we remember the needs of others no matter what we ourselves are facing?

Secondly, in verse 16, *'they don't need to go'*. We have come to the point in the story where the crowd have been engaging with Jesus, probably listening to him speak to them as well as witnessing the compassion and healing. It's getting dark and to put in bluntly the disciples want rid of the crowd! They are also concerned about the crowd getting hungry and they don't seem to have a Fire and Dough Pizza Van to hand to help them keep the hunger at bay! So the disciples go to Jesus and encourage him to send the crowds away to they can go and buy food in the villages. I was being a bit flippant, if you hadn't noticed, when I said the disciples wanted rid of the crowd, I think in fact what we see is a deep care by the disciples for those who have gathered and an awareness that travelling in the dark wasn't always safe. I believe it is a caring and practical response from the disciples to encourage Jesus to draw his teaching and healing to an end and send the crowd home for tea!

Jesus' response however is different, *'they don't need to go, you give them something to eat'*. Can you imagine the disciples reaction, what do you mean they don't need to go, we haven't got anything, there are thousands of them, what is he on about! But Jesus knew that there would be plenty, Jesus knew that between what the disciples were about to give and what he could do there would be enough, there would be plenty, there would be an abundance.

Jesus knew then and knows now, that if those who follow Jesus work in partnership with him, if those who follow Jesus offer what they have to God and work with God then there will always be enough. They don't need to go says Jesus, the crowd didn't need to go because Jesus knew when those who followed him worked in partnership with him there would be enough. Similarly today, when those who follow Jesus work in partnership with him the way of God, the kingdom of God can flourish with abundance and generosity. How do we individually and together work in partnership with God?

Thirdly, *bring them here to me*, in verse 18. Despite what Jesus has said in verse 16 the disciples are clearly not convinced! They have just five loaves and two fishes, in the other accounts these are the items in a child's packed lunch, they are understandably nervous about how 5 loaves and 2 fish will feed 5000+ people. The difference, the miracle of course happens when Jesus says '*bring them to me*' and then Jesus shares in the four fold action which is at the heart of the communion service, he takes them, gives thanks for them, breaks them and shares them. It is about partnership, the generosity and abundance of God comes when we take to Jesus what we have and let Jesus be the one who miraculously enables the generosity and abundance. We are called to work in partnership with Jesus and our part in that partnership is to take what we have to Jesus and partake with him in the miraculous generosity and abundance that flows from his love and grace for all the world.

This passage has strong parallels with the stories in Exodus of Moses providing food for God's people in the wilderness. There is a hint to that when the account begins with Jesus going to a solitary place, a desert place. The parallels continue in the provision of bread for all. But what always strikes me and the commentators pick up on in that here in the feeding of the multitude Jesus goes beyond what Moses did in the wilderness. For me that is always signified by the 12 baskets left over. On one level there are 12 baskets for the 12 tribes of Israel, on another level those who are there have been fed but there is, in the 12 baskets, symbolically enough for everyone, for all God's people, for there is always enough generosity and abundance when it is God's generosity and abundance we are talking about.

He had compassion on them, do not send them away, bring them here to me.

Three short phrases but ones that remind us that at the heart of this story, at the heart of Jesus is a God of miraculous abundance and generosity. A God who in partnership with those who follow Jesus will pour abundance and generosity of all who are in need and ensure there is plenty left for everyone.

Often when I preach on this passage I spend more time drawing on the parallels between the actions of Jesus here in the taking, blessing, breaking and sharing of the bread and how that connects with the sacrament of holy communion today. At this time when we are not celebrating communion that felt like a place I didn't want to go and in some ways was difficult for me as I

know it is for many of you. We know that the sacrament of Holy Communion shows the abundance and generosity of God and enables us, through bread and wine, to share in that.

As I read the commentaries for the sermon though I was reminded by Henry McKeating in his commentary that this whole passage is set in the context of Jesus wanting to be on his own. The last thing Jesus wanted to do was to heal the sick, to perform a miracle, he wanted to be on his own, in a solitary place to grieve John the Baptists death. In this passage yes Jesus provides bread and fish for all to eat, it is a story of abundance and generosity but that isn't the whole of the story. This whole story is framed in the Jesus who wanted to be on his own but who does something else, the Jesus who offers bread but much more than that, who has a generous self giving spirit. This means despite his desire to be on his own he gives himself to his people, in fact it is only by his self giving to the crowd which itself is generous that the abundance of bread and fish is possible. If he'd sent them away, if he's insisted on being on his own the miraculous feeding would never have happened because Jesus wouldn't be with the crowd.

Whilst we long to share in holy communion together the framing of this passage reminds us that the generosity and abundance we find in the sacrament of holy communion is only possible because of the great self giving love of Jesus in giving himself for the world on the cross. Whilst we long to share bread and wine that is not the whole story of our faith as Christians, we may not be able to share bread and wine at this time but we can share with Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, the one who by his self giving on the cross makes us whole and gives us life.

As I reflected on this I was reminded at a very deep level of the generous and abundant love that Jesus has for me, for us, for Hexham and for the world.

My prayer is that as God's people we will want to be people of generosity and abundance just as Jesus is for us. I pray that this passage will have reminded us that we are called to work in partnership with Jesus not to send away those who are in need, not to try and solve all their problems ourselves but to have compassion on them with Jesus, to not let them go from Jesus and to give ourselves and what we have in partnership to Jesus to that the abundance and generosity can be seen and shared.

As I began with many people have given their time during lockdown, Many of those will have been people of faith, but there is a difference when we offer to help as follows of Jesus. When we seek to overcome injustice, when we seek to support the marginalised we seek to do it with Jesus, in partnership with Jesus, in partnership with his self giving love and grace. That makes all the difference that means we don't just bring our generosity to the situation but the miraculous generosity and abundance of God.

In the coming weeks and months we are all going to find ourselves in many different situations, some which are easy and others which are difficult. There will be many times I am sure when we don't know what to do, which way to turn or how to help someone in need. In those moments, in

every moment, we need to remember we are not islands, we don't seek to help alone but we help in partnership with everyone else who follows Jesus and most importantly in partnership with Jesus himself.

My prayer is that this passage has reminded you of the amazing self giving of Jesus and of his miraculous abundant generosity. I pray that in the weeks and months ahead it will remind you that we are called to be partners with Jesus and with one another and that by offering all you have, by bringing others to Jesus you will see more and more of his love and grace in your life and together we will see God's abundant generosity flowing across Hexham and beyond. Amen.