

SERMON: Isaiah 55.1–5; Psalm 145.8–9, 145.14–21; Romans 9.1–16; Matthew 14.13–21: The Compassion, Power and Guiding Hand of Jesus

Dear Father, we thank you for your compassion and mercy towards all your children. May we always sit humbly before your feet in gratitude and strive to be your instruments of loving service. AMEN

Today's gospel reading is of course well known: the feeding of the five thousand with two fish and 5 loaves. In its familiarity I am curious to know what it says to you. What does it tell you about Jesus?

As I reflected on this question, three things came to mind: One, Jesus has boundless compassion. Two, He has divine power and authority and three, He wishes to share his authority with his disciples.

He has boundless compassion

Despite wanting to be alone to reflect on the death of John the Baptist, when he saw the crowds choosing to follow him he gave of himself with complete compassion. In his humanity, Jesus chose to follow the path to his crucifixion. He knew that John's death was a harbinger of his own, yet he chose to continue spreading the good news of God's kingdom regardless of the consequences.

Matthew also weaves a divine element of compassion into this narrative. Verse 19 tells us: *"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."* These words and this action evokes the Passover celebration that Jesus shares with his disciples the night before his crucifixion and which we commemorate through Holy Communion. Jesus does likewise in the second miracle of the feeding of the four thousand in Matt 15. 36. Theologian Jeannine K. Brown suggests that: *"by tying together the two feeding miracles with the Passover celebration, Matthew signals that these miracles should be understood as echoing Israel's experience in the wilderness."* God showed his compassion on the Israelites, despite their complaining, by delivering signs and wonders to deliver them from Egypt and then providing manna from heaven in the wilderness, the sustenance they needed to continue their journey to the promised land. Just so, Jesus feeds the thousands of people, both physically and spiritually, so they may continue their journey with him towards God's kingdom on earth. Our Psalmist, quoting very similar words from Exodus 34.6, expresses this compassion well in verses 8 and 9:

⁸ *The Lord is gracious and compassionate:
slow to anger and of great goodness.*

⁹ *The Lord is loving to every one of us:
and his mercy is over all his works.*

The same message shines through the opening verse of Isaiah 55:

¹ *Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.*

This message invites us to consider: How do we experience God's compassion in our lives? How are we sustained on our faith journey?

He has divine power and authority.

The second point of reflection is on the power and authority of Jesus. He not only healed all their sick but he also miraculously fed around 5,000 men, plus all the women and children as well. We can each react differently when we read of the supernatural acts of Jesus. Some simply accept in faith, others seek to delve deeper into understanding what happened. In whichever way we respond, it's important that we note the crucial link between God's power and authority and His compassion. Brown puts it this way: *"Preaching a God who has all authority but no compassion would offer a terrifying divine portrait, and preaching a God who has great compassion but no power to save would offer an anemic one."* The Good News of the gospel is that Jesus, like Yahweh, is both compassionate and has the power to save all his children.

I'll digress for a moment to briefly cover an alternative view raised in our reading from Romans 9.1-16 on this last point: God's power to save us all. In this section of his letter Paul argues that the reason many Jews have rejected Jesus is because God pre-destined that they would. In essence he suggests that God has deliberately elected to not save some Jews because they are "children of the flesh" and not "children of the promise". The logical extension of this argument challenges the idea of free will. It suggests that God pre-determines exactly who will be saved and who won't be. This is a perspective so at odds with the rest of the bible that it has led many theologians and myself to wish that Paul had never written it! It's worth noting that while in this small section of his letter Paul excludes some Jews, further on in Romans 11. 26, he declares that once enough Gentiles have converted then **"ALL Israel will be saved."**

Theologians have debated these seeming contradictions within the writings of Paul for centuries. I'm not going to pretend that I can resolve this dilemma. What I will say though, is that it highlights the need to never read sections of the bible in isolation. Whenever Jesus preached the Good News, he did so with great compassion and, inherently, gave the listener the opportunity to accept or reject His Father's message of salvation. Either way it was a powerful experience they were unlikely to forget!

And the question for us is: How have we experienced the action of God's power and authority in our lives? Both in our past and right now, where do we see the guiding hand of our Lord?

He has shared his power and authority with his disciples

The third point to consider is the way Jesus shares his power and authority with his disciples. When the disciples asked Jesus to send the people away to get food, in verse Matthew 14.16: "¹⁶ Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.'"

Their response of: "¹⁷ We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish," shows they don't yet understand the authority Jesus is giving to them. By these few words Jesus was inviting them to share his power to serve and care for God's children. He wanted **them** to feed the hungry people, not himself. But the disciples still joined in the performance of this miracle as they distributed the food. That they would be used as powerful instruments to continue the work of Jesus became abundantly clear after His crucifixion. And that truth is equally applicable to us today. As Barclay says: "*Jesus Christ needs disciples through whom He can work, and through whom His truth and His love can enter into the lives of others.*"

Our parish is filled with disciples who have faithfully committed to being instruments of Christ in loving service to one another and our community. To help us discern how best to do this we prayerfully prepared our Mission Action Plan. I want to stress that this was not just an administrative exercise to be filed in a draw and pulled out only once a year for our AGM. We are using that plan to prioritise the way we serve. We are above all seeking the ongoing guidance of our Lord through His Spirit and so the final question I'll pose is: How do we sense God wants us to share his power and authority in this place at this time?

In conclusion, I give thanks for our Lord's continued blessing on our Parish. May we be ever aware of his compassion, power and guiding hand. AMEN.