

Sunday Worship on 2 August 2020

Call to worship: taken from Isaiah 55. God says, 'Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Why do you spend money on that which is not bread, and labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen to me, eat what is good, and delight in me.' Come to worship.

Hymn: How great thou art

Prayer:

How can we fail to sing your praise, O God, when creation speaks of your greatness and resounds with your power? How can we fail to sing your praise, O God, when people of faith testify to your mercy, and their lives are filled with your grace?

How can we fail to sing your praise, O God, when your sense of justice compels us to speak out and act for others in their need? For you are near to all who call on you, you hear our cry and uphold us when we fall, you watch over us and keep faith with us as we sing your praise. Amen.

And our confession has a response, when the leader says 'Forgive us our sins', the response is 'as we forgive those who sin against us'.

When your kingdom on earth is a pale reflection of your kingdom in heaven, because there is still hunger and need, and there is still greed and gluttony:

Forgive us our sins

As we forgive those who sin against us

When your kingdom on earth is a pale reflection of your kingdom in heaven, because people are still homeless and refugees still seek sanctuary:

Forgive us our sins

As we forgive those who sin against us

When your kingdom on earth is a pale reflection of your kingdom in heaven, because conflicts and wars rage between peoples and nations, and prejudice and hatred divide neighbours and families:

Forgive us our sins

As we forgive those who sin against us

When your kingdom on earth is a pale reflection of your kingdom in heaven, because love and compassion are seldom seen, and hard-nosed reality collides with justice:

Forgive us our sins

As we forgive those who sin against us

We say the Lord's Prayer together.

Bible reading: Matthew 14: 13-21 from The Message

Supper for Five Thousand

¹³⁻¹⁴ When Jesus got the news, he slipped away by boat to an out-of-the-way place by himself. But unsuccessfully—someone saw him and the word got around. Soon a lot of people from the nearby villages walked around the lake to where he was. When he saw them coming, he was overcome with pity and healed their sick.

¹⁵ Toward evening the disciples approached him. "We're out in the country and it's getting late. Dismiss the people so they can go to the villages and get some supper."

¹⁶ But Jesus said, "There is no need to dismiss them. You give them supper."

¹⁷ "All we have are five loaves of bread and two fish," they said.

¹⁸⁻²¹ Jesus said, "Bring them here." Then he had the people sit on the grass. He took the five loaves and two fish, lifted his face to heaven in prayer, blessed, broke, and gave the bread to the disciples. The disciples then gave the food to the congregation. They all ate their fill. They gathered twelve baskets of leftovers. About five thousand were fed.

Sermon

This passage has a heart-breaking beginning. The news that Jesus has heard is the murder of his second cousin, John the Baptist at Herod's birthday party. So we can understand his desire to withdraw from the crowds and take a bit of time out, to grieve as he remembered his relative and to be aware that the fate John had suffered would perhaps be a pointer to his own.

But Jesus isn't given as much time as he perhaps would have liked, for the crowds search for him, the people are needy, they have heard and seen him in action and they come for healing, they want to see and experience him for themselves. They have a hunger and thirst, not just for physical food but for something more, for spiritual awakening and renewal you might say, why else would they more or less stalk Jesus?

The disciples have a solution to the physical hunger – 'send them away to get their own food'. We hear that sort of response in so many ways today. 'We don't want them in our country', 'we can't afford to give to other countries', 'why can't they feed themselves, they've got mobile 'phones haven't they?' 'we don't want that sort here'.

I don't know whether or not you saw one of the programmes broadcast at Easter, a repeat from last year which featured Karen Gibson, the founder and director of the Kingdom Choir. She talked about her mum coming to the UK and wanting to find an Anglican church similar to the one that she had been used to in Guyana. She found one not too far from where she lived. After a few weeks of attendance at the hour-long services, the vicar waited for her at the end of the morning, extended his hand to shake hers and said "Thanks for coming, but don't come back, please." What a slap in the face.

Just a few weeks ago Karen had some business at a church and took her mum along. Here's the story in her words "As we pulled up outside the building, I had a strong sense that I wanted to take mum inside with me. I wanted the Vicar to meet her. I didn't know why – maybe it's because people are instantly drawn to mum's warm and embracing nature. As we strolled along, she casually informed me that this was the church that she had visited and been banned from all those years ago. I was incredulous, as she had never before identified the location that had caused such grievance.

We walked inside and were quickly greeted by the Vicar, a friendly and trendy lady in her early forties who sauntered out in her sports gear with the biggest smile....I mentioned that this was the place my mother used to attend, many moons ago. It was the Vicar's turn to be incredulous. With a rare sensitivity and genuine interest, she asked: 'And how was your experience – was it a good one?' I looked at mum, who said nothing, but simply bowed her head with a wry smile. The Vicar then turned to me with wide, enquiring eyes and a quickly reddening face "Really? Is that what's going on here", I also said nothing.

Suddenly, without giving it a second thought, and to the great surprise and consternation of mum and me, this wonderful, love-filled woman dropped to her knees in front of mum and with heartfelt repentance, poured out the most impassioned apology. I was stunned. Mum simply smiled her forgiveness back and responded 'it's all right. That's life'.

How gracious – of them both. We who follow Jesus have the responsibility to be gracious, to offer grace, even and perhaps especially when we don't feel like it. Jesus is offering bread to the people, and in such a way that there are lots of leftovers. He continues to offer bread to the very end of his ministry, when he speaks of bread being like his body, which will be broken for us, bread which is also a 'foretaste of the heavenly banquet', bread the most basic of foodstuffs which in many ways is so ordinary, but which satisfies hunger today as it did then, both physically and spiritually.

When we receive bread at holy communion services, we receive Christ and I don't mean that the nature of the bread changes, but that we receive a tangible sign of his grace for us individually. And when we return from the table we should try to embody his love and grace for the world for he sends us out. Having received such a sign we are called to be signs of the Kingdom.

Hymn: Longing for light, we wait in darkness (Christ be our light)

Prayers of intercession

Final hymn: Guide me, O thou great Jehovah. We end with the benediction