

Mark 6.30-44

Jesus is... the compassionate shepherd

St Editha's Amington

Sunday 25 February 2018

Mark: Seeing Jesus (16)

Introduction

Did you hear about the Italian chef that died? He pasta way.

Why did the students eat their homework?

Because it was a piece of cake.

Why do oranges do well at school? They can concentrate.

Today we are thinking about food... and if you thought those jokes were bad, they don't get any better.

The Feeding of the 5,000 (Men) is the only one of Jesus' miracles which appears in all four gospels. And, like the time Jesus made about 1,000 bottles-worth of wine at the wedding at Cana, so also here Jesus makes far more food than was necessary to feed the crowd – they ended up with more in scraps than they started with.

Something else is going on here, something deeper.

Let's remind ourselves of what has just happened in Mark's account of Jesus' ministry.

Two weeks ago we saw how Jesus sent his disciples **two by two**, out into the surrounding villages (6). They were to take nothing with them except the clothes they wore, and **a staff** (8-9).

Then last week we saw how John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod – who styled himself as a 'king', even though he wasn't. Mark even refers to him as 'king', with a 'kingdom', five times (14, 22, 23, 25, 26).

And now we rejoin the disciples as they returned to Jesus, full of excitement and energy after a successful mission trip, where they had healed the sick, cast out demons, and preached Jesus' message of repentance.

This is a Markan Sandwich. Either side we have the disciples being sent out, and then returning, and in the middle we have 'king' Herod beheading John the Baptist.

Mark is comparing the opulence of Herod's banquet with the way the disciples took no food, and with the simplicity of Jesus' banquet on the **green grass**; and he is comparing the rash pride of Herod with the generosity and compassion of Jesus, the good shepherd.

But more importantly than that, Mark shows us how Jesus taught his disciples to follow him, by words and by example. He taught them that they needed to be **focused**, **flexible** and **faithful**.

Focused (30-32)

First: a disciple should be focused.

I can't imagine how excited the disciples must have been when they came back from their mission to the villages and towns of Galilee. They had healed the sick, cast out demons, and preached Jesus' message of repentance – it must have been exhilarating. The way I picture the scene, they are all talking at once, full of excitement and energy, buzzing with passion for what they'd done and seen.

If I had been one of them, I would have told Jesus about what had happened at approximately 100mph, and then expected him to send me right back out again – after all, they were doing good work, and *that's* what's most important, right?

Wrong.

First of all, Mark completely skips over what the apostles had been doing – he barely mentions it (30). They might as well have been selling fish down the market!

Speaking of fish – what do you get if you cross an apple with shellfish? A crab apple.

Secondly, Jesus does *not* send them back out immediately, as I would have wanted, but says, **‘Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest’** (31).

Jesus shows his compassion for the disciples by recognising how tired they must be after their mission trip – physically, emotionally, spiritually. One of my books puts it like this: **they needed quiet, and re-creation, and more opportunities to learn. So do we.** (English, BST, 133).

Friends we cannot *do* all the time, we cannot *give* all the time, we cannot be *busy* all the time. When the disciples got back from their trip, they didn’t stop – **so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat** (31). They were doing good things, amazing things, important things.

But what is *more* important is the time we give to God in rest, in stillness and in quiet. Yes we need to go when we are sent, but how will we know where to go unless we listen? And how will we learn to listen if our life is full of constant noise and activity? God rarely speaks in a crash of thunder – most of the time it is a whisper.

It is so easy for individuals, for entire churches, to be busy with the *things* and the *work* of God, while ignoring God himself. When we fall into that trap, we can all too easily end up doing things that aren't bad things to do, but they aren't right either – we lose our focus. It is every bit as important to see what to stop, as it is to see what to start – and to discern what those are, we need to learn to focus on God.

Disciples need to be focused – not on what needs to be done, but on the one who calls us and sends us out. Sometimes we'll need to go out, sometimes we'll need to come back and recharge. Always we need to make time to be still, so we can listen, and stay focused, not on the work of God, but on God himself.

What do you do if life gives you melons? See a doctor, because you're dyslexic.

How do you make a golden soup? You put 24 carrots in it.

Flexible (33-34)

So first, disciples need to be focused. But second, they need to be open to changing plans, they need to be flexible.

Have you ever made plans to do something, and then at the last minute something has gone wrong, and you've had to change what you're doing completely?

I like to plan, so this happens to me all the time. I find it hugely frustrating when I make plans with other people, and then they change. Especially if they change multiple times!

And so this is encouraging for me – because even Jesus had to change his plans. He and the disciples had to postpone their rest and recuperation for a day or two, because on their way to a **solitary place** (32), they were seen, and before they landed the boat on the beach the crowds were already there (33).

Now I know I've said it before, but it's true – it's a *really* good job I'm not Jesus. There is no way I would have responded to the crowds like he did.

I would have been so cross that my best-laid plans for a quiet retreat, away from the crowds, spending time with my heavenly Father, had been so spectacularly spoiled by such a massive crowd.

But not Jesus.

When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

Mark 6.34 (NIV)

Throughout the Old Testament the leaders of God's people are called shepherds – so calling the people **sheep without a shepherd** is an implied criticism of Israel's current leaders, including 'king' Herod – the filling of this particular Markan sandwich.

The people were hungry – initially not for bread, but for teaching. They were lost, helpless, without the caring and nurturing leaders they needed.

And so Jesus **began teaching them many things** (34). He may have had plans, he may have wanted to spend time alone with God – but he was flexible, he responded to the need of the people in front of him. He was flexible, he put his own plans to one side, so he could feed the people with the spiritual food they needed.

No fifteen-minute homilies for him – this spiritual feeding, this teaching lasted all day, until it grew late, and the people hungry – this time for actual bread.

Faithful (35-44)

Disciples need to be focused on God, making sure we spend time in stillness and quiet, learning to listen to what God is saying.

Disciples need to be flexible in their plans and open to changing circumstances and the need of the people God calls us to serve.

And thirdly, disciples need to be faithful.

How do you make an apple turnover? Push it down a hill.

Why didn't the sesame seeds want leave the casino? Because they were on a roll.

It was late in the day, so his disciples came to [Jesus]. 'This is a remote place,' they said, 'and it's already very late. Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.'

Mark 6.35-36 (NIV)

Here are some clues that the disciples still had a lot to learn. First of all, they were *telling* Jesus what to do. It's hardly the best model of prayer, is it?! *Pause* But if we're honest, how often do our prayers consist of us effectively telling God what to do, rather than listening to what he might be saying to us?

Second of all, they were still thinking in human terms about what they could do. Look at their response when Jesus tells *them* to feed the crowd:

‘That would take more than half a year’s wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?’

Mark 6.37 (NIV)

Despite the miracles of healing and release from demons, despite the preaching they had done, the disciples still hadn’t learned the lesson that all that was *God* working *through* them.

And if it’s *God* working *through* us, he doesn’t need half a year’s wages to feed 5,000 men (plus women and children)!

If I were Jesus, I’d be rolling my eyes now and telling the disciples, probably quite crossly, to give me their packed lunch.

Instead Jesus graciously asked them what they had – which turned out to be **five loaves and two fish** (38). So that’s 0.1% of a roll, and 0.04% of a fish for each man, and nothing for the women and children.

Ridiculous though that sounds, some people have suggested that’s actually what happened – everyone got a tiny morsel of food.

But that is to ignore the words Mark uses:

They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish.

Mark 6.42–43 (NIV)

The word Mark uses for ‘satisfied’ implies plenty, an abundance of food, so as not to leave anyone hungry. Plus, you don’t get *twelve* basketfuls of leftovers from food that would barely fill *one* basket, *before* thousands of people had taken a bite.

Some have suggested the ‘miracle’ was no miracle at all, but people sharing the food they’d brought with them. But if plenty of people *had* food, why would the disciples need to tell Jesus to send them away to *buy* food?

Perhaps we need the faith to believe Jesus could – and did – feed 5,000 men, plus women and children, with a packed lunch.

The way Jesus blessed the bread reminds us of the way he blessed the bread at the Last Supper, the way a father began a family meal: **taking the loaves, he gave thanks, broke** them, and **gave them to his disciples** (42). This was a family meal, open to all, with enough for all – all we have to do is open our hands to receive it. This miracle is a picture of the kingdom of God itself.

Like the amount of water Jesus turned into wine, the abundance is ridiculous. There was far too much food, even for the thousands in the crowd, and every person there ate enough to be full.

This is a picture of the kingdom of God. There isn't simply enough to go around, there is more than enough for everyone who wants it to be filled to the brim with the gifts God gives: new life, forgiveness, a fresh start, the Holy Spirit and all the gifts and ministries he brings, many brothers and sisters in Christ, adoption into the family of God – the list goes on.

And where does this abundance come from? Does it come from us? No: it comes *from* God, but it does usually go *through* us.

The disciples did very little here. In fact, they did three things: first, they gave Jesus what they had; second, they shared what he gave them; third, they collected what was left over at the end.

They got it wrong to start with, but in the end they were faithful. Disciples should be focused, flexible, and faithful. They did as Jesus asked, and they gave him what they had.

And that's what Jesus asks of us. He doesn't expect any one of us to transform the world, to transform Tamworth, to transform Amington – even to transform a single person.

That is the bit in the middle, the bit Jesus does, the miracle bit.

What do you call holy cheese? Cheeses of Nazareth.

What Jesus asks of us, is that we come to him and give him what we have. It doesn't matter how much or how little we have, or think we have. It all came from God anyway – and he asks us to offer it back to him, to take and use and multiply and do things with it that we couldn't imagine, let alone do in our own strength.

What do you have?

What time do you have? What money do you have? What gifts do you have? What passion do you have? What is in your heart, what is in your hands, what is in your mind, that you could give to Jesus, for him to take and use and transform and multiply?

Friends, can I please encourage you to think and pray about what you have to offer to Jesus.

If you do that, like the disciples did, you'll find that Jesus can do extraordinary things with even the most ordinary packed lunch.