

## "Hope needs feeding"

Reflection: July 21, 2024 Rev'd Ian Brown

Mk 6: 30 - 34, 53 - 56 & Eph 2: 11 - 22

There are a few tough jobs in our world! Some just love a challenge, or really hard work, but who would want the job of cleaning up a construction union? Who would want to sell icecream to eskimos or cottage garden flowers to villages in the rainforrest?

Who would like the job of getting world wide enthusiasm going for the olympic games that are starting next week? Who would want to manage the security for the upcoming US elections? Or the borders on any number of frontiers? There are many hard, frustrating and exhausting jobs.

I guess most of us would agree that Jesus had a tough job. There were always people chasing him for something; hoping for help, hoping to find what they needed in him.

Reading through Mark chapter 6 we follow the story of Jesus sending out the disciples interrupted by a death. It's the end of the story of John the Baptist, inserted here because Jesus growing reputation has Herod getting nervous. Then we get back to the flow of the story and the disciples are back and telling their stories and Jesus offers a rest after their hard work. Off they go, but there are more interruptions waiting – and we keep on seeing that the interruptions and how Jesus and friends respond, is the story and is the ministry.

Have you been in a scene like this; crowds gathering, expectant of a prominent person? In this section of Mark's gospel, Jesus is the one at the centre of the Palestinian paparazzi. He seems to be a crowd magnet. Wherever he goes, Jesus has a multitude gather, needy people, sick people, outcast people, and just people wanting to hear and see and learn from Jesus. Was Jesus attractive because he had long golden flowing hair and beard, chiselled features like we see in so many Italianate paintings? If it were the case, the gospels don't bother to mention it. Ordinary looking Jewish

Palestinians have dark olive skin, typically dark hair. Jesus was not white. What we do know is that they came. Many people came, flooded out to see and hear him, they came from the towns and the countryside and they chased him from, one side of lake Galilee to the other. What was it that they recognised in Jesus or needed from him?

People are not flocking to church so much now in most of the western world. And Christian critics on the conservative side say, "see what we have done, numbers are down, we've lost influence and power, we must return to our old traditions or else the church is doomed." While critics on the progressive side say, "see what our traditional practices led to, numbers are down, we've lost influence and power, we must change more or be doomed."

Both are largely wrong, and partly right too. Jesus drew crowds, not because of a tradition of crowds, not because of deception or a slick program of entertainment. No, they were attracted because he was good news. He actually did good things, taught helpfully, helped compassionately. People came because they were healed, restored, taught and welcomed. Their deep hungers were fed, their needs were met. Jesus didn't take from the people, he gave and loved and after equipping, sent them on to do the same for others.

In Mark's gospel, the story we heard concerned the disciples who had just been out on their first mission putting their faith into practice. They come back to Jesus full of stories. Jesus response is pastoral. "He said to them, come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." They went away in the boat to a deserted place, Mark tells us. Jesus knew what it was like to be active in the work of God's kingdom - to teach and to meet people's needs. The gospels often tell us that he went to a quiet place or up a mountain to pray - to be by himself, to have some time out.

Jesus concern is for his disciples, for us; for our well being, a well being that includes human needs. He knew the need for balance, for rest

and for food, for reflection and for having the spiritual batteries recharged. The real miracle of this is perhaps that the disciples had got to practice their faith and had some success! But there's a dynamic woven into the sequence of stories here.

Like the crowds need help, Jesus followers need it too, with constant teaching and correction. There's a dynamic of helping work and drawing aside for rest and reflection. There is a constant stream of need; people in need, wanting to touch the hem of Jesus garment in the hope of finding help. And there is the need to regroup, the need for rest and for moving on.

The words from Ephesians really find their mark here. In striking words, the Christian church is asked to remember that once you were "without Christ", once aliens, once strangers and without God - once disconnected from the source of life, once we were not a community. But through Christ, who has broken down the walls between us, we are reconciled, brought together, peace is made. In him, "the whole structure is joined together,.. in whom you are built together spiritually, into a dwelling place for God."

This is what our mainstream traditions have lost a focus on, or perhaps, rarely had much of at all. You and me together, we the body of Christ, the church in this place are to be of such a quality of togetherness, that God will be seen to dwell among us!

It might take a lifetime to put into practice! I wonder what more 'being together' might be helpful for this here, what fellowship, what coming together for working and for retreating together could help build us together? But then it's Christ that is the cornerstone who gives the shape to it all and who holds the structure together, not us, thankfully! And it's the Spirit of Jesus who enables and empowers the whole enterprise. Attraction to Jesus, as we see it in the gospel, is meant to translate into attraction to Christ's church; Jesus body here now. The nature of our togetherness is important!

Like us, Jesus and his disciples weren't always together, he sent them out to get on with the job, to put their faith into practice, but he also received them back to reflect and share and retreat together. So here, as we gather as Christ's body to reflect, to celebrate, to pray together, the question is pointed. Where is our faith exercised? What is the nature of our togetherness? Is this a place where hope can be touched and God is seen to dwell?

Jesus mission was not all plain sailing either. Faith has always attracted controversy, always upset some, been misunderstood by many. It's worth remembering that Jesus and his disciples had their intentions to rest and reflect thwarted. He said to his friends: "Come away with me to a lonely place, and rest a while." He went to the unpopular shore looking for a bit of peace and quiet. Yet when he arrived, another crowd of human needs found him there, and he didn't send them away. He let them invade his space, for they 'were like sheep without a shepherd'.

It's Jesus who always welcomes us, allows us to celebrate life in joy or grief. He is the one who is there for people, even on his day off. This Christ enables us to go on, even in the worst circumstances. Jesus and his followers lived in the real world of interruptions and frustrating work, of human need and pressures, just like we do. Sometimes our needs may get put off, but part of the balance of putting our faith into action has to be in the drawing aside with Jesus.

There is our direction, our rest, our fellowship and the equipping we need. Here is hope, here is our feeding. Only here is the true pattern of Christian life and service, the shaping of a people who will do and be God's good news in the world. Amen