**2nd August 2020**

Call to worship

Then let us come together to share in God’s love,
to lift our hearts and voices in praise and worship,
to seek God’s blessing with a new and deep experience
of God’s power and generosity.
Amen.



**HYMN 74 Praise to the Lord the Almighty**

A gathering prayer

Mighty God of miracles, we come before you.
We imagine what it might have been like
being part of a crowd of 5,000.

There may be far fewer of us here today,
but we think about the people in other churches in our town,
village, and country, also worshipping you.
Bound together by your great love,
we gather in spirit to meet with you, Jesus.
Amen.



A prayer of approach

Dear God,
you look deep inside us,
seeing not only our outer but our inner needs.
Have compassion on us, we pray.
Feed us today from your holy word,
and we will be filled.
Amen.



A prayer of confession

Sometimes, Lord,
I know I don’t listen properly to you.
I’m easily distracted.
Or I listen, but still go my own way,
putting myself first.
Forgiven by you, I can start anew.

Sometimes, Lord, I don’t trust you
to meet my needs,
to take care of me,
to feed me with food both physical and spiritual.
Forgiven by you, I can start anew.

Sometimes, Lord,
I’m anything but prepared for my journey with you.
Forgiven by you, I can start anew.

Sometimes, Lord,
I look for my own ways out of a situation,
instead of seeking and trusting you.
Forgiven by you, I can start anew.
Amen.



A prayer of adoration

Lord God of compassion and boundless blessings,
we are full of amazement
that you care so greatly for the needs of your people.
We worship and adore you for your generosity,
your love, and your power.
Amen.

**Bible Reading: Matthew 14.13-21**

Since last weekend we’ve had to wear face masks to go shopping. It’s a bit more hassle let’s be honest. There’s been a number of times this week that I’ve set out to buy some food or pay the papers and I’ve got half way there, even on one occasion I got to the door of the supermarket, and I thought ‘blast’ I’ve forgotten my face mask – and I’ve had to turn back go home and come out again. Bit of a hassle until we get into the new routine, the new normal (that dreaded and now overworked phrase).

Our Bible reading today is about our needs, the compassion of Jesus, but the hassle that makes for his followers. It’s a real hassle following Jesus!

The well-known story of the feeding of the five thousand at its most basic is about food and our need for it. At its most basic, we need it to sustain us and keep us going. But it can also become much more than that: a source of delight and joy, whether through culinary magic, or through the company with which we share it. And of course, through August at participating restaurants you can get up to 50 % off your meal – eat out to help out - to encourage people to support the hospitality industry.

During the lockdown period food has been one of the most talked-about aspects.[[1]](#endnote-1) First there were the shortages – possibly the first time that those of us normally blessed with a comfortable lifestyle will ever have experienced worry about what we will eat:

* empty shelves where the eggs or fresh vegetables would normally be in the supermarket.
* no online delivery slots even for loyal customers.
* no chance of signing up if you weren’t already a customer.

Once the panic-buying subsided, the sourdough bread-making began, with every Instagrammer showing off their new lockdown-learnt baking skills. Great to see Clare’s photos last week of her attempts! Now we’re hearing how big retailers like [Amazon are taking advantage of food shopping habits moving online](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8569553/Amazon-Fresh-joins-day-delivery-service-groceries-trial-south-east-England.html), and how much less many of us – myself included – should eat if we are to [stay well and save the NHS](http://www.itv.com/news/2020-07-26/lose-5lbs-to-help-save-the-nhs-money-says-health-secretary) as the Prime Minister focused on tackling obesity this week.

That’s one side of the experience. On the other, many in our society have to struggle to feed themselves and their families. In the current crisis, with schools closed and work and income drying up for many, it has become harder to ignore just how many people live in or close to the edge of food poverty. Perhaps this time their cries will be heard and their needs met?

In June, [the campaign headed by the footballer Marcus Rashford won its battle to secure summer food vouchers for children in need](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jun/16/boris-johnson-faces-tory-rebellion-over-marcus-rashfords-school-meals-call). Now the government’s own [National Food Strategy](http://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/) review says [free school meals should be extended to all children in households on universal credit and equivalent benefits](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-53574164), to provide them with the “foundation of equality and opportunity” they need. What is not clear yet is how this extension will be funded.

During the school holidays the churches in our town have been working together to put on pop up creative cafes, offering free food and art activities to the children and their parents or grandparents who have come along with them. It was designed as a show of hospitality and free grace to our community. The church wanting to give and serve and bless. It has been growing in popularity. The first week we had 15 people come to the Quarry Chapel. Last week we had over 60. Likewise, at the Tab there were about 40 in the first week and 70 this week just gone. We are now beginning to panic that we won’t have enough for everyone who may turn up this coming week. How are we going to cope? Mmm, sounds familiar to our bible reading today?

The crowds who gathered to listen to Jesus will have been just as mixed as our society. Some rich, some poor. But their experience on that day was levelled out by their distance from anywhere to get food quickly, just as, perhaps, lockdown has levelled out our own experiences a little, giving us shared struggles and a clearer glimpse of others’ needs.

The crowds were all hungry and needed to be fed; the disciples saw and brought that need to Jesus. But they were understandably daunted by his demand that *they* meet that need. Feed all these thousands of people with just what we have here? It’s only five loaves and two fish, barely enough for us!

I know that when I am confronted with others’ needs, that is sometimes my reaction too: But Lord, I do not have enough time, energy, courage, hope, wisdom, skill, strength, love, money, even to sustain myself! See what little I have; how can it be of any use to the situations I see in front of me?

Let’s be honest – it’s a real hassle following Jesus. The rest of the world often just looks after themselves and every now and again gives a bit of charity. You follow Jesus who tells you to love your neighbour as you love yourself.

Look what happened at the start of this story. Jesus has just heard that his cousin John has been executed. He had lost him in a manner which must have warned Jesus of what lay ahead for him too. So, Jesus slips away to be quiet and alone, to ponder on the cost of his mission and to pray to his heavenly father. Yet when he slips away the crowds discover where he is and throng all around him.

My reaction would be to keep the door locked and the phones turned off. I want to be alone. I’m off duty: GO AWAY!

Yet Jesus reaction is not anger or frustration, nor an assertion of his right to privacy and relaxation, but compassion. He translates his sorrow over John, and perhaps his sorrow over himself, into sorrow for them, the crowd.

Before the outward and visible works of power, healing the sick, comes the inward and invisible work of power, through prayer, in which Jesus transforms his own feelings into love for those in need.

We have started to look at prayer in its many forms in the Prayer course on Wednesday nights and will continue this Wednesday to look at petitions. Do feel free to join us.

Jesus did retreat from the demands of his ministry – even he needed a break, even though it was a short one.

Perhaps Jesus just got enough time to recharge his batteries, his sense of perspective and balance, to go out and face the world again. Those of us who follow the Son of God, may need longer to retreat from the demands of the world and others. We are not the Messiah. Perhaps some of us need to remind ourselves of that. Some of us are, in Monty Python’s famous phrase, not the Messiah just naughty boys ….and girls (lets make this gender inclusive).

Nevertheless, if you hang round Jesus enough, his compassion and love for all affects you[[2]](#endnote-2). It inspires you and gets under your skin. You can’t help yourself. You see how Jesus cares for people, and you want to care for them too. So, you think what might be best for them, and come to him with a suggestion. Wouldn’t it be good to send them away now, so they can go and buy food rather than all getting hungry here, miles away from anywhere?

I’m sure Jesus is always delighted when people come up with ideas which show they are thinking of the needs of others and not just themselves. But then comes the challenge and the twist: the hassle: if you really care for them, why don’t YOU give them something to eat? We thought we could just ask you Jesus and you would sort it. Now we have the hassle of having to do it ourselves!

So, our small idea and wistful thoughts of being compassionate and doing something gets bounced back at us with what seems like a huge and impossible proposal!

You protest - as did the disciples in this story: ‘we only have five loaves and two fishes. It could be the other excuses, however legitimate: I can’t do it! I haven’t got the time! I haven’t got the energy! I haven’t got the ability. I haven’t got the money! All I have is….

And that is the next step – again typical of how God’s calling works. You hang around Jesus – you have an idea – it might be a bit vague but comes from the heart and is in the right place – in this case, that people should be fed. Jesus takes that and proposes achieving it by a different way. You say it’s impossible – but you’re prepared to give him what you’ve got if it will do any good.

It will cost you. It is costly following Jesus: it is costly business – it’s a hassle or a hustle sometimes! It may mean that you go hungry instead – but now you’re in too deep to stop. Once the power of Jesus’ compassion catches you up you can’t stop.

Jesus takes the little that is brought before him and blesses it, looking to heaven, to God. With God’s blessing the small gift shared grows in the sharing until it is enough to meet the needs of everyone present, and to overflow beyond. What we bring, God will bless. No matter how inadequate or small.

And now those offerings to those in need are ours and not ours, both what we had in mind and not what we had in mind but something more mysterious and powerful.

And so, in all our burdens, and feeling put on, our inadequacy, our selfishness and selflessness, comes service in the name of Jesus. Then we can look back in amazement to see what God does with our bits and pieces and mixed motives and meager resources.

Two strong resonances in the story should not be missed.[[3]](#endnote-3) The first is the reminder of how God provided manna in the wilderness. Matthew does not labour this, but the fact that he describes the place as a wilderness suggests that he has the wanderings of the people under Moses in mind. And the fact that the crowds are looking to Jesus for leadership suggests that they see him as a new Moses.

The other resonance is the strong echo of Holy Communion, the Lord’s Supper in the language of verse 19b. Of course, no one in the crowds or the disciples would have got this, but we do – because we are reading this story after the Last Supper became the central celebratory meal of the Christian tradition. And with this, there is a strong echo of the messianic banquet of Isaiah chapter 25: here God’s people feast in celebration of the coming of his kingdom and their place in it.

There is one other echo that is worth noting. The story immediately before this one was set in a lavish banquet presided over by a self-aggrandising empire builder (Herod). Here we have the opposite: another king, generously providing for all those who look to him for guidance and leadership in a kingdom of grace and welcome, hospitality and where no one is in need.

Costly business following Jesus. Bit of a hassle sometimes, as Jesus hustles out of you compassion and selflessness to respond to the needs of others. But, it’s worth it. Really it is.

“And all ate and were satisfied” (Matthew 14.20). Thanks be to God!

**Prayer**

Take time to think about what small things you could offer to or share with others: a meal; companionship for a walk; a phone call; a letter? And if you think it’s not enough or no one would welcome it, offer it in prayer to God anyway and talk to someone else about it – perhaps it will meet a need of which they’re aware?

If you’re lucky enough that your own material needs are met, you could consider investigating local or national charities that help those who are not in that situation. If you can support the churches initiative in offering food and art activities to the children of our community please do. Let’s remember the need in our world at the moment.

**First of all a prayer for ourselves, drawing on Psalm 145.8-9,14-21 from this week’s readings**

God of grace, good to all,
You have compassion over all you have made.
When I am falling, hold me up.
Raise me to my feet, so that I can walk with you.
When I am in need, meet with me.
Open your hands to me, to satisfy my longing.
When I call out to you, hear my cry.
Watch over me, that I may live in your love.
When I am hurt, lend me your grace.Open my heart, that I may forgive.
When I see need, help me to face it.
Open my hands, to offer all I have and am.
When I hear you, help me listen.
Open my mouth, to bless your name.
Amen.



Prayers of intercession

Lord, today, we pray for people who have little or nothing:
for those who feel trapped in their situation,
and can’t see the bigger picture,
or even any tiny glimmer of light.

We pray for people who are hungry:
for parents who struggle to feed their children, and themselves.
We thank you for the work of food banks,
and pray that they would have the resources
to continue to meet so many needs.

We pray that you would give us an appreciation of our food:
the work that goes into producing and distributing it.
Teach us not to be wasteful,
but to preserve and pass on the goodness of your earth.
Amen.

Lord God,
we gratefully receive your gifts of bread and wine as we gather round your table.
By your Holy Spirit bless these gifts that we take, bless and break in the name of our Lord Jesus, remembering his love and costly compassion for us and his call on our lives to follow him in loving everyone

Bless us abundantly
as we seek opportunities
to share you with those around us as we share in you now through this bread and wine.
Amen.

Sharing of bread and wine

HYMN 314 Break thou the bread of life

Prayer:

Creator God,
we give thanks for the relationships between us.
Help us to remember and celebrate these relationships
in good times and bad.
Remind us to celebrate one another.
Help us to depend on one another
both in good times and bad.

Build up our common life,
for the sake of our witness to your Son
and for the sake of his kingdom.
In the strength of the Holy Spirit we pray.
Amen.

The Lord’s Prayer

HYMN: 345 Guide me O Thou great Jehovah

Notices

A sending out prayer

By the end of the day, the crowds must have been exhausted.
They left with full stomachs and full hearts.
They had met with Jesus.
You have fed us this morning, Lord,
and we go out to live the lives you call us to.
May we be conscious of your perfect timing in our lives,
as we reach out to the outsiders as well as to our own.
And the blessing of God be ours now and always

1. Rebecca Foley <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/108-july-august-a/proper-13/postscript> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Tom Wright, Matthew for Everyone, SPCK 2004 p185-188 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/108-july-august-a/proper-13/bible-notes> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)