

Prelude: An arrangement of the Welsh hymn tune, 'Calon Lân' by Robert Jones, played by John Crombie

Words of welcome

We stop what we are doing, and make a space to remember the presence and the goodness of God. We allow our knowledge of God's love to seep deep into our hearts so that the joy of being loved can fill our lives. And we worship God singing

Hymn: God is good

Prayer

Lord God you are good. You are goodness itself.

And you are love, the whole gamut of what we call love is found in you.

You are God, good, loving, powerful, compassionate, humble and mighty and we bow our heads and hearts before you with joyful reverence. For we cannot help but be joyful when we remember that you who are God are also our father, and that your Son Jesus showed your love so that we could call him brother.

Forgive us for the times when we do not pause to remember you, when we live as though you were far away, instead of closer to us than our own thoughts. Forgive us when we may doubt your love and forget to look for your presence with us and with the life of the world.

In your faithfulness forgive us and in this short time of worship restore our faith and hope in you.

We pray as Jesus taught us, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom the power and the glory for ever. Amen.

Reading: Mark 8:1-21

There is a sense of déjà-vu about this story of the feeding of the four thousand. The details are not the same, but there is a large crowd with no food, and Jesus has compassion on them, and the disciples – well, the disciples seem to have forgotten all about the previous feeding of the five thousand men. In fact, the lesson of the loaves is one which the disciples seem very slow to learn. Mark remarks on it when shortly after the first feeding they are surprised to see Jesus walking over the waves to them. The implication being that if he could feed the multitude then the waves would be no problem. And now they are again at a loss when Jesus suggests that they feed the crowd. Maybe they didn't like to be the ones to suggest that Jesus does again what he did before? Or maybe this is one of the occasions when you had to be there to hear the way that things were said.

Jesus says to his friends, "I have compassion for the crowd, for they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way – and some of them have come from a great distance."

And maybe at these words the disciples' faces were wreathed in smiles and they gave knowing winks as they said, "How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?" In other words, they knew what they expected might happen. And then it did.

However, even if that was the way of it, Mark is not going to let the disciples off the hook. They set off for Dalmanutha, and there they encountered Pharisees asking for a sign. Asking for a sign, when if they were to spend their time watching Jesus, just spend time with him, they would see all that he was doing and see their sign all right. But they don't want to know the truth, and they don't want to spend time watching Jesus: they want to test him. They probably are lining up a specific sign or wonder for him to perform for them. They want Jesus to dance to their piping, to confirm their position of authority by doing what they demanded of him. It was a bit of power play. And, of course, Jesus turns them down flat and goes away. So far, so expected.

But the disciples have been with Jesus all this time. They have heard and watched and been part of his mission, so why would they be dismayed because they had forgotten to bring any of the leftovers from the feeding with them? One loaf of bread among 13 was not much – not when you remember that it is something like a round of pitta bread that is probably meant. But they had just helped feed four thousand people! They couldn't, they just couldn't have forgotten that Jesus had now twice fed people, far more people, from proportionately smaller supplies! Did they think that such acts would only be for crowds, and not for them? Or is Jesus' point that he didn't do such things as a sign of who he is, but, as he specifically said, because he had compassion on the hungry people? Maybe the disciples, amazed at what they are seeing him do, cannot help but concentrate on the unusual, and look for what it means in terms of a sign from God. In which case they are getting perilously close to the attitude of the Pharisees, as Jesus says.

Jesus fed the people for the same reasons that he healed people, for the same reasons that he walked on water to reassure his friends – from love and compassion. He wasn't proving a point when he did these things, but was expressing the love of God. And so of course he can and will do the same for his friends as he has done for the crowd. He is not someone different in private than he is in public.

Hymn: Meekness and majesty

Reading: 2 Timothy 2:8-13

The story of the feeding of the four thousand and what followed is a reminder to us that there are no shortcuts to being a disciple. There are no shortcuts to discovering who Jesus is, there are no shortcuts in being a disciple and in following Jesus' way. The only way to follow Jesus is to live with him. The only way to follow Jesus is to spend time with him, lots of time, so that you learn to see the world through his eyes, smiling or sighing at the things that make him smile or sigh. The only way to follow Jesus is to watch him, see what he does, the unusual and the very usual, the large and the small, and to ponder this and draw conclusions – and act on them.

The Pharisees wanted to find another way to know if Jesus was worth paying attention to. And the way that they sought was one which would not require them to question themselves and their own status and authority. In fact they wanted to find out if they could use Jesus for their own ends – and they haven't been the last to do this.

But there are no shortcuts. And why would you want there to be? When the way of the disciple is to stay close to Jesus, what more could you ask of life? When the way that we learn from him and about him is by the adventure of discovering him for ourselves, what could be more satisfying? Following Jesus is not a hobby or a part-time activity, not something you can learn about and then tick off as having achieved that.

It is when we spend time with Jesus, in Scripture, in prayer, in talking about him with other disciples, and in reflection that we begin to see not only what he does and why, we

begin to see the compassion that motivates all he does, whether to the watching world it looks spectacular or so normal that you could forget to see it. Or indeed whether it is something that shocks: such as all the times when Jesus allowed those with infectious diseases to come close to him and even dared to touch them.

The disciples had maybe not factored in any thought that Jesus would do for them what he did for others. That can be a failing of us modern people as well. We look for Jesus to work elsewhere: to do the wonderful in places of great need and with people who are suffering, but we can forget to remember that Jesus cares about us as well. The love of God is not so small that it can reach out only to the most afflicted in the world. I can't tell you how often someone who is suffering in body or with grief or with some kind of trouble has said to me, "But there's lots worse off." As though suffering was in some way ranked, and, by implication that God would care first for those who are at the top of the ranking and suffering the most.

The compassion of Jesus does not work that way. He has already walked over the waves to reassure himself that his friends were all right. He is not going to let them go hungry when he has just fed a crowd – even if it is their own fault that they have forgotten to bring any of the left-overs away. The compassion of Jesus reaches out to you as much as to the swathes of humanity who suffer in ways that are not yours. The love of God the Father is for all of his children, and to show love to one does not mean that he has less to give – less time, less attention, less anything – to another.

Jesus loves those who are learning to live with him and look to him and who are puzzling and pondering over him and praying to him and sometimes forgetting to ask for his help. People like you and me, and so, so many others! Also, don't beat yourself up if you find you are slow to learn. Mark seems determined to show us that this was certainly true of the twelve disciples – and maybe he does this to give us reassurance, and even hope. Even when they were fussing about bread, Jesus didn't give up on his disciples: Jesus never does give up on those who sincerely seek to know him and follow him. It is only on those who, like the Pharisees, try to make him dance to their own tune, that he turns his back.

It is worth remembering the ancient hymn that Paul quotes to Timothy when he is urging him to remain faithful to his calling:

If we have died with him we will also live with him;

If we endure, we will also reign with him;

If we deny him, he will deny us;

If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself.

Sometimes we are faithless – we forget our faith or doubt, or expect less from God than he wants to give us. But he keeps faith with us, for God, as shown by Jesus, is bigger than our expectations, and cares more and more deeply than we can sometimes bring ourselves to believe. He cares for you. And it is when we can believe it, that his love can move through us and inspire us to show his care for the world.

Hymn/Anthem: Unless a grain of wheat falls on the earth and dies

Before we come to prayer, just a reminder that this coming Wednesday is the third in the month, and so our weekly Zoom prayer service will include communion. If you have not yet got the log in details for this and would like to be present do get in touch. And if you are going to be present, do bring your bread and wine, or something similar, with you!

Prayer

Lord God of love and care and compassion, we bring to you our prayers for those who suffer and grieve and worry and mourn. We bring our prayers because we believe that you are the

God who cares, and that you will move to show your care and compassion. Help us to remember and believe that your love and care is also for we who pray as well as those others we would name before you.

We pray for people who are suffering from weakness of the body: for those in the world who are in hospital with Covid or with other causes; for those in the world who are ill and cannot hope to find a doctor; for those in the world who have learned to live with the aches of rheumatism or the niggle of angina or the tightness of asthma. Bring your compassion to those who are weak and may they find your love transforming their lives.

We pray for people who are sad in the world: for all who are bereaved from whatever cause – natural deaths and violence, war and hunger and old age. You know that sorrow is sorrow. May the sorrow of the world, over which you sigh, become a channel for your love to flow with reassurance and healing and hope.

On a day when our society makes much of the idea of romantic love, we thank you that you are the God of all love and that all true love has its roots in you. We pray today for those who feel unloved and uncared for, forgotten or of no worth and ask that we would show, by how we treat anyone, that they are of worth to us and to you.

We pray for your church in the world, as your children face so many challenges. May our response to whatever challenges come our way be to give in love, over and over again. May our reflex action always be to look to you and look at you, to reflect on how you lived through the challenges that came your way – when to meet them and when to turn from them. Help us, Lord Jesus, to know ourselves as truly your body and truly your children, so that we may know our place in your plan for the world.

Hear all the prayer that we offer in the name of Jesus, Amen.

Hymn: O love that wilt not let me go

Benediction

Knowing that you are loved and cherished by God
Go out into the world with the peace of God's love in your heart, and be a blessing.
And the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you now and always,
Amen

Postlude: Bach Chorale "Liebster Jesu" (or dearest Jesus we are here) played by Alan Buchan on the St. Bride's organ.