2-8-20 Sermon for St James Bolton ‘Back to normal or moving forward?’ by Rev Steve Lees

Isaiah 55:1-5 & Matthew 14:13-21

What strange times we’ve been living through. This Sunday we reopen St James Church for public worship. It feels like a momentous step…but we are restricted; we need to maintain social distance and we can’t sing…so really, it’s like dipping our toe in the water rather than diving in for a long swim! Not quite back to normal. But it’s good just to unpick that phrase; can we go *back*? Not really, in life, things are always changing. Do we want to get back to *normal*? What is normal…and should we settle for it? Actually, life doesn’t quite allow us to go back to normal…we need to go forward to somewhere/something new. Just like the Israelites journeyed out of Egypt, on their great exodus through the wilderness and into the promised land…a better place.

So, how are we going to move forward? Maybe we feel like we’re in some kind of wilderness at the moment, how will we get to a better place? I want to highlight 3 points from our Bible readings today: COMPASSION, GIVING AWAY & MULTIPLICATION (sounds like a Maths lesson! More of that later.)

In Matthew 14, we find the familiar story of the Feeding of the 5000. The problem with familiarity is that we are in danger of thinking we can’t learn any more from it. Let’s just pause, and see where this passage fits. In other words what is the context? Well, Jesus has just heard of the death of his cousin, John then Baptist, and it’s no ordinary death. John has been murdered; his head placed on a platter by Herod to fulfil a rash promise. Imagine how Jesus was feeling, he was bereaved and he decided to ‘withdraw by boat privately to a solitary place’ (Mt 14:13). He needs time out to reflect, to retreat. What about us? Our recent experience of lockdown has in some ways been like a bereavement, we have lost things…we’ve lost friends, some to the virus…in the last week two dear saints have died. If Jesus felt the need to reflect and retreat, how much more ought we to do the same! Rest and retreat are vital to us but as we will go on to see in Jesus’ model; we retreat in order to advance.

Have you had that experience where you just want to go off and hide somewhere but when you try, you get interrupted? Jesus withdrew but pretty soon a large crowd followed him. In that situation my reaction would be to get irritated, angry even, but notice Jesus’ response – COMPASSION. Jesus translates his sorrow over John, and himself, into sorrow for the crowd. But before the outward and visible work of power, in healing the sick, comes the inward and invisible of power in which Jesus transforms his own feelings into love for those in need. I love that word compassion; it means not only having sympathy with other people’s distress but also having the desire to alleviate it; not just having caring thoughts but doing something about them. And as the song goes ‘Everyone needs compassion, love that’s never failing’. You, me, everyone needs the compassion of Jesus. Receive His compassion today.

How can we receive the compassion of Jesus? Isaiah 55 has some guidance. First ‘Come’. ‘Come all who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come buy and eat!’ (Isa 55:1) Wow, that could be describing the 5000 who’ve set out to see Jesus but forgotten to bring any food for the journey. Jesus provided actually physical food for them…what do you need from Jesus today? Maybe something material, like food, a healing like many in the crowd, or something spiritual? Come to Jesus and freely receive. Secondly Listen to Jesus. ‘Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fair’ (v2) It’s so tempting for us when we pray to treat in like a shopping list, telling God what we need (as we’ve already said there’s definitely a place for that) but we also need to practice listening. How can you listen to God? At one of our Wednesday night prayer times on Zoom we each shared how we heard from God. The variety was amazing and reflected the fact that because we are different characters, God speaks to us in different ways. Here are a few of the ways we shared; through the Bible; through songs; through nature; through other people; through dreams; through pictures. However, He chooses to speak to you, listen!

We were thinking last week about being disciples of Jesus and the biggest point of our discipleship is that we become like Jesus. So, how on earth can we become more compassionate? Well, strangely, as with so much of the Gospel, it’s to do with GIVING AWAY. In our Bible passage, the disciples with Jesus recognise the problem that this huge crowd is getting hungry So they come to Jesus with an idea, ‘Send them away’. Jesus is pleased that they care but he turns their idea back on themselves; ‘You give them something to eat’(v15). Compassion doesn’t just think, it does! They protest, they haven’t got the resources, the time, the energy! Sound familiar…it does to me!

St John’s version of this feeding miracle (John 6) involves a small boy, who seems to be the only one who’s been prepared and actually brought some food for the journey! The disciples bring him to Jesus with his 5 loaves and 2 fishes; it’s perhaps enough to feed two people, why bother! But this small boy takes a massive risk and gives away his lunch to Jesus. This may well mean he goes hungry, it’s costly. He’s actually following the model of Jesus who gives away himself, shows compassion on crowds when all he wanted to do was grieve for his cousin…ultimately of course the cost for Jesus will be death on a cross. But back to the boy, he is demonstrating grace. He has been blessed to have food but he doesn’t cling on to it, instead he gives it away…and yet in the giving away, ‘all ate and were satisfied’ (v20)..including the boy! We become more compassionate, more like Jesus by giving away!

But you might well say I haven’t got anything to give away. Really? You might not have wealth or material things but you do have lots more to give away; talents, time, words, skills…and compassion. The small boy had just a little food in his hands but when he gives it away to Jesus, Jesus does a MULTIPLICATION. In maths we can take away (or give away!), we can add (4+4=8) but we also have multiplication (4x4=16). This is what Jesus does with the little in the boy’s hands that is freely given, he multiplies it! What have you got in your hands? How could Jesus multiply that as you freely give it away to him? Tom Wright says, ‘Jesus takes ideas, loaves and fishes, money, a sense of humour, time (etc)…He holds them before his father with prayer and blessing. Then breaking them so they are ready for use he gives them back to us to give to those who need them.’

There is a cost to giving away, we have to let go, see our offerings, best laid plans be broken but reshaped by Jesus into something greater. Let this be our prayer at St James that we will look with amazement at what Jesus will do with the meagre bits and pieces we offer Him. May we receive the compassion of Jesus, only to give the compassion of Jesus away, to see it multiplied in our church, in our community, in our world. Amen.