

Church at home

East Leake Methodist Church - 2 August 2020

Sit comfortably in a quiet place and prepare, start with a brief period of silence, turning your mind and spirit towards God.

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech,
night after night they display knowledge.
There is no speech or language
where their voice is not heard,
Their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world. Psalm 19 vv1-4

**Hymn StF 152 This is the day,
This is the day that the Lord has made**

Prayer of Adoration

Living God,
for revealing yourself in Christ,
we praise you.

For coming among us through him,
walking our earth,
identifying yourself with what it means to be human,
we thank you.

For the life and ministry of Jesus,
For his words and deeds,
death and resurrection,
and the knowledge that, through his Spirit, he is with us still,
we worship you.

Open our hearts again to his searching challenge,
healing touch
and, by his grace,
help us to know him better. In Jesus' name we pray
Amen.

Prayer of Confession

Father eternal, Giver of light and grace,
We have sinned against you and against our fellow men,
in what we have thought,
in what we have said and done,
through ignorance, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault.

We have wounded your love, and we have marred your image in us.

We are sorry and ashamed, and repent of all our sins.

For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, who died for us,
forgive us all that is past,
and lead us from darkness to walk as children of light. **Amen**

Let us join in the Lord's Prayer. Our Father

Readings

Matthew 14. 13-21

Hebrews 4. 14-16

Address

The Feeding of Five Thousand is the only miracle of Jesus that is reported in all four gospels. Clearly, it was a very important story to the early Church. Why was that?

One answer is that the miracle involved a lot of people. All four gospels tell us that there were 5,000 men there, and women and children in addition. This happened in Galilee, and when the early Christians began to share their faith in Galilee after the resurrection, they must have met a lot of people who said to them "I saw Jesus! He fed me! I was there!"

Another answer is that it was a very public miracle. Many of Jesus' healings were done in private. At times he expressly told people who had been healed not to tell anyone. But on this occasion the people who took part in the miracle must have rushed home to tell all their family and friends about the marvellous things that had happened to them.

Also, this was an easy miracle to understand. People who were hungry got fed.

It is interesting to compare the four gospel accounts. The other gospel accounts are in Mark 6.32-44, Luke 9.10-17 and John 6.5-13. If you have time you might like to read them all. I found that my memory of the story was a sort of composite of details from all four gospels. Each author adds an extra detail.

All our authors agree that Jesus and his disciples deliberately went to a lonely place because they were being overwhelmed by crowds of people looking for miracles. Jesus had already been travelling round Galilee teaching and healing for some time and people were eager to have their illnesses cured and to see and hear this man who was doing these amazing things. Five thousand men plus women and children is a very large crowd, particularly in those days when the population was much lower.

(The number of men is listed separately because in the Jewish culture of the day men and women usually ate separately in public. The children ate with the women. So when the crowd was put into groups the men would have been seated in separate areas from the women and children).

Luke tells us that this miracle occurred near to Bethsaida, a town on the north eastern shore of Lake Galilee. Matthew tells us that Jesus withdrew privately by boat to a

solitary place. But it was of no use – the crowds followed on foot walking round the lake. When Jesus landed and saw them Matthew tells us that “he had compassion on them and healed their sick”. No wonder the crowds came.

Mark tells us that Jesus saw the crowds as “sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.”

It grew late. One would expect the crowds to slowly drift away, feeling tired and hungry after a long day. Apparently not. They were too fascinated to leave. It was Jesus and his disciples who realised that an awkward situation had arisen with a very large crowd in a lonely place where there was no food.

Mark gives us some details of what happened next – the discussion between Jesus and his disciples about how impossible it was to buy food for everyone there. He tells us that Jesus told the disciples to get all the people sit down in groups “on the green grass”. They sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. If you have ever been involved in a big event in the open air you will know that handing out food has to be tightly organised to prevent a scrum.

We all know what happened next. It is John who tells us that it was a boy who offered his five small barley loaves and two small fish to Jesus. Jesus took the loaves and fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, who broke the food up further and distributed it.

Everyone had enough and at the end there was spare – twelve basketfuls of broken pieces. Jesus told the disciples to gather the pieces that were left over so that nothing was wasted. This was in accordance with Jewish custom. Also remember that this was a subsistence economy when ordinary people knew that no food should be thrown away.

What is the significance of this gospel story for us?

Firstly it shows Jesus caring for the crowds who followed him. Physically he fed them and he healed them. Spiritually he taught them about God. He had compassion on them.

Secondly in this story we may see echoes of the Last Supper. In this story Jesus gave thanks, broke the loaves then gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He fed the people with physical food.

At the Last Supper Jesus took the bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples saying “Take and eat; this is my body”. When we commemorate the Last Supper by celebrating communion we remember the spiritual food that Jesus gives to us.

Lastly we have a glimpse of Jesus praying to his Father for strength to perform this great miracle. We read
“Taking the five loaves and the two fish and *looking up to heaven*, he gave thanks and broke the loaves”. (My italics).
It was a brief prayer for extra strength at the end of an exceptional day.

There are other occasions when we see Jesus doing the same. In Mark 7. 31-35 we read of Jesus healing a man who was deaf and almost dumb. Jesus led the man away from the crowd. Then

"he looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him 'Ephphatha!' (which means, 'Be opened!'). At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened, and he began to speak plainly."

In John 17 verse 1 at the end of the Last Supper Jesus

"looked towards heaven and prayed:

Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you."

At the end of this prayer Jesus and his disciples leave for the Garden of Gethsemane and for the arrest by Roman soldiers that awaits him.

The phrase "looking up to heaven" reminds us of Jesus' humanity while he was here on earth. It speaks of his frailty and of his separation from His Father.

In our second reading, the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews also reminds us of Jesus' humanity. He talks of Jesus as a great high priest. Then he continues "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin"

In looking towards heaven Jesus is momentarily detaching himself from the situation around him and focusing on God His Father and asking for extra strength.

The people of Jesus' time were limited in their world view by the state of their knowledge at the time, just as we are. Many of them thought of the world as a "three decker" universe – the living on the earth, the dead underneath it and God in the sky above. Our knowledge of the physical world is still limited, but today we all have a mental image of our planet speeding through the limitless expanses of space, and looking very small compared to other planets, stars, nebulae and galaxies. So our vision of God is much larger. Does He appear in other dimensions, as yet unknown to us?

Despite our much greater knowledge of the physical worlds outside our planet, I still find it helpful to use the biblical picture of God in heaven above as expressing the idea of God far beyond us yet at the same time interested in our little world. How wonderful to be able to say that! He is a great God!

So we too can ask God for extra strength as Jesus did. We look "up" to detach ourselves for a moment from the immediate crisis that is before us. We remember God's eternal strength and power, and we call upon it. Believing that we have that extra strength, we are then better able to deal with what is confronting us.

Sometimes this type of prayer is called an arrow prayer.

So, when covid 19 next gets us down, or we are troubled by difficult decisions, let us look up from the problem. Let us look up to God. Let us remember the power of God and how he loves to help us. Let us lean on God's strength to enable us deal with what is in front of us.

A Reflective Prayer:

Thank you for your merciful and loving care for your whole world, day by day.

Thank you for the stories of Jesus that show us who you are.

Praise to you Almighty God, Master of Space and Time. **Amen**

**Hymn StF 264 Make way, make way, for Christ the King
in splendour arrives;**

Prayers of Intercession

We begin our prayers by returning to the scene of Jesus and his disciples being followed to a lonely place in the countryside by the great horde of people, eager to see Him.

Dear Lord, just as those crowds walked for a long way to see you, may we be diligent in searching for you. We ask that your Holy Spirit may speak to us as we pray. May your Word be clear to us as we read our bibles, and as we learn about you through internet services and other materials. Please strengthen us for the challenges in our lives as we talk of you with friends and as we worship you together. We ask all these prayers through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Let us now pray for our world.

**To the sentence Lord of all, the Word made flesh
Please respond Bring hope to your world today.**

God our Father
Grant us the help of your Spirit
In our prayers for all people

First we remember all the countries of our world, all affected by the scourge of covid 19.

Help the scientists as they research the causes of the virus and try to find a cure; and help the leaders of the nations to manage the economic and social problems that the virus has brought

**Lord of all, the Word made flesh
Bring hope to your world today.**

Next we pray for our country.

May we be diligent in taking care of one another in whatever way we can during this time.

We pray for all the carers, nurses and medical staff involved. Give them energy and persistence to keep working away at the task in front of them

**Lord of all, the Word made flesh
Bring hope to your world today.**

We pray for the Church throughout the World.

We pray for our church and for the other churches in our area.

Give strength to our ministers and church leaders to chart a way forward, to comfort and to encourage

**Lord of all, the Word made flesh
Bring hope to your world today.**

We pray for our friends and neighbours.

We pray for all those who are dear to us.
In the silence, let us pray for those we know who are in distress of mind or body. Let them know that you are there and that you bring healing and strength

**Lord of all, the Word made flesh
Bring hope to your world today.**

We offer all these prayers in the mighty name of Our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen**

**Hymn: StF 338 There is a Redeemer,
Jesus, God's own Son,**

Closing Prayers

Lord of heaven and earth,
all creation resounds with your praise.
As we rejoice in your presence
may we know your power to save.
Now and for ever,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

May God bless us
In our sleep with rest, in our dreams with vision,
In our waking with a calm mind,
In our soul with the friendship of the Holy Spirit,
Today and every day. **Amen**

This service was prepared by Angela Latham for East Leake Methodist Church