



The gospel readings for the past few weeks, whether drawn from Mark's Gospel (which is the 'gospel of the year' for Year B in the three-year cycle of readings in the Common Lectionary) or John's Gospel (used to supplement the readings from Mark, which is much shorter than Matthew (Year A) and Luke (Year C)) seem to be full of 'rushing about'. We have been using the Common Lectionary in the Church of England for over 20 years now, but this 'rushing about' characteristic has not struck me before. Week after week we have read about instances where Jesus and the disciples have been going about, and all the time the crowds have flocked round them, bringing their sick to be healed or, as last week, requiring a multitude to be fed. If they take to a boat on the Sea of Galilee, and cross to the other side, the locals see them coming and congregate in crowds on the beach, clamouring for attention. It all sounds exhausting to me, and I sense that the disciples were getting a bit fed up with it, but Jesus seems to maintain his composure, and, we are told 'had compassion on them' [the crowds].



When I realised this constant pressure on Jesus it put me in mind of the health services in Britain and around the world over the past 18 months, as the effects of Covid-19 have led to almost overwhelming numbers being taken into hospital, many with a need for the highest levels of care imaginable. We have seen pictures from inside intensive care wards where staff have been giving their all to try to save the lives of their patients, and to restore them to health wherever they can. If we needed examples of love in action, we have had plenty to choose from over these past months, and it is not, of course, only in hospitals that such self-giving has been manifest, but in untold millions of acts of care and support, most of them known only to the individuals concerned.



Today's gospel reading begins in just the same way as the others in recent weeks, with the crowds eagerly awaiting Jesus' arrival, but this time Jesus answers them not with a string of healing miracles, or a free bun-fight, but with a challenge. He knows that the crowd were seeking healing for their sick friends, or the miraculous generation of a free meal



and were interested in him only in so far as he could provide these things. Now he urges them to look beyond those material things to the things of eternity, to the things that were his purpose in coming to live among mankind. I get the sense from the gospel today that the crowd were not that keen on this change of direction, but they try to cover up their appetite for more material goodies under the pious form, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” and then they care even less for his reply and try to challenge him to pull more rabbits out of hats, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you?”, and they try to link this with a challenge from their scriptures, our Old Testament – “Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness” – the implication is, “What are you going to do to top that, then?”. His answer is to invite them to come to him and believe in him. We are not told what the crowd make of this, but a few verses later we learn that ‘the Jews’, the leaders of the people, who had heard what Jesus had said, took exception to it, first on the grounds that he was a very ordinary person – why! they even knew his father – and then on more complicated theological grounds, beginning to see that his claims about himself are more profound than they had even guessed. Of course, we have the benefit of hindsight when hearing these words. We don’t have a problem with Jesus’ humble origins, and we are not aghast when he says that he is the bread of life, but we ought to feel a challenge when we hear his invitation to come to him and to believe in him, because we know that to respond whole-heartedly to the invitation will involve us in life changing ways of living, not just in some one-off conversion, but day-by-day.



Going back to my earlier consideration of the demands the plague has made upon us in today’s world, not all of us have been rushed off our feet, caring for others round the clock. Indeed, especially during the times of lockdown, the best thing many of us could do was to stay at home and keep out of the way. Even doing that, there was potential for lending support to others by keeping in touch with by telephone etc, and there was also, in theory at least, time for doing more of what Jesus is urging the crowd to do, and look beyond our present concerns to how the world might be. Trying to imagine a better world than the one we have known, one based on justice, more sharing, more loving; I have done a bit of that, but I have done a lot more of feeling outraged when some hapless government minister has been caught out in some bare-faced hypocrisy, or someone has been slow to take hard decisions.



In today’s epistle, S. Paul is encouraging the church at Ephesus to foster the gentle arts – bearing with one another in love. He stresses that they should not allow themselves to be tossed about by every wind of doctrine (and I wonder if it is stretching a point to identify this with the ‘fake news’ of today’s social media that has some folk believing that vaccines are an instrument of control devised by megalomaniac rulers), but rather that they should be ‘speaking truth in love’ and being knit together into a wholesome community where the contributions of everyone are acknowledged and valued. It is this mode of living that follows on from truly coming to Jesus and believing in him. I hope that our churches reflect something of this mode of life. Pray that our individual lives might manifest it too.

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