

SERMON, AL 020820 – ROMS 9.1-5, MATT 14.13-21

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The story of the feeding of the 5,000 – we know that one. One of those miracle stories that perhaps we struggle we believe, but actually that implies we think about it, most of the time we just take these stories for granted, we've heard them so often. I don't think I'd ever made the connection with the first verse of the passage we read – “When Jesus heard that Herod had beheaded John the Baptist, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself.”

Jesus and John were cousins. Their mums knew each other well enough that it was Elizabeth Mary went to when she found she was pregnant. John was only a few months older than Jesus, so you can imagine the mums and their babies, two toddlers causing mayhem together, boys growing up, knowing that somehow they were different. John's parents were elderly, perhaps it was to his aunt Mary and cousin Jesus that he went when they died. Joseph the Carpenter was older than Mary, perhaps Jesus chatted to his cousin John when he had to cope with the death of the man who had, to all intents and purposes, been his dad. John went off to the desert, proclaiming the Kingdom of God, preaching, teaching, baptising – Jesus came to him, he was baptised, and no doubt the two men sat and talked, working out what it was that God had called them both to do.

Then Jesus gets the news that his cousin has been executed. He stood against Herod, he told the ruler of his people that his morals were appalling, that he had gone against the will of God. At a drunken party, an orgy from the sounds of it, Herod's daughter Salome has her way – and the head of John the Baptist is presented on a plate. Well, that's cheered us all up – bet you're glad to be back!

You can imagine how that news affected Jesus – coping with the death of a friend is bad enough, but the execution of your cousin – that's another level of pain and suffering. No doubt Jesus knew where his life was leading, his mother had always known that “a sword will pierce your own heart too” – but when his cousin is executed, that must have made it so real. I am not surprised he went off by himself, trying to make sense of it all, probably needing to ask his Father “why”.

I am not going to suggest that what we have been through has been anything like this – but it is enough to make us ask “why”.

Life for all of us is good. We catch many glimpses of God's kingdom, we have wonderful friends, we have a very special church. We started this year feeling

remarkably positive. Even on Ash Wednesday we commenced our Lenten journey looking forward to Easter – we know Lent is a time to look in on ourselves, a time for prayer and reflection, but we always start Lent knowing that Easter isn't far away. The place will be full of flowers, the Candle will be lit, we will sing and shout Alleluia!

And suddenly, it stopped. A week or two of realisation that this was not normal, a few very stressful days. At one point I was so stressed I phoned the bishop's office for advice, and ended up talking to Bishop Libby herself. She calmed me down, told me she was behind me and I could tell the cross family to phone her, and she did everything I needed to make me know I was supported. Indeed, all through this I am very grateful to her, and to Archdeacon Chris and to Simon our Area Dean for their support – I am not always as polite and grateful to the diocese as I ought to be, so can I put it on record today that I think they have been very good, and we are fortunate. A glimpse of the kingdom of God in the people I work with.

We've needed those glimpses, because we have been coping with something evil. We must be very careful at pointing the finger, blaming a city, a province, a country – it is much easier to have “an enemy” when actually, the way humans relate to their environment, the way we care for the world, the sort of world we have built, all these may well have contributed to where we are now. I regularly use the word “dis-ease”, a world that is out of kilter with God, a world where evil is at work. Evil is at work – some people have benefitted from the crisis, there are a small group of people in our country who have been made wealthier by Covid, even wealthier than they were before. Evil is at work – some employers have treated their workers appallingly. Evil is at work – some people have taken out their anger in violence against foreigners, people who look Chinese. Evil is at work – scammers, criminals take advantage of the chaos. Weeds, evil, suffering, disease, dis-ease, death – all of these are things that have no place in the Kingdom of God.

The evil remains, and life is tough – it will continue to be tough. There was a crisis in care before all this, and it's worse than it was. Our NHS was under strain before all this, and it's worse than it was. There was a crisis in mental health, in the mental health of our young people – and that's only been magnified. To say nothing of the economy – despite the slogans, I am struggling to believe things will be OK. Like our Lord, I would love to take a boat, withdraw to a deserted place by myself. I could say I was going to commune with God, to talk to him, to spend quality time in prayer – or I could just say I'm off because I can't cope with humans, any humans. I've had enough. The truth is, of course, that we've done both of those during the last few months – at

times I hope we've all felt close to God, at other times he has seemed a very long way away.

Sometimes God meets us in the silence – and sometimes he just says “get on with it”. “He saw a great crowd and had compassion on them” – perhaps Jesus is holy enough that that's all he felt, perhaps there was a moment when he saw them and thought “O go away”, but Matthew didn't feel he could record that.

There's a job to do – get on with it. There are people who need healing, so Jesus gets on and does it. 2,000 years later the healing takes place in different ways – and thank God for our healers.

Then, as the day draws to an end, there is more to be done. The disciples are sensible – they've been here long enough, send them away, let them sort themselves out. “No” says Jesus “you feed them”. “We've got five loaves and two fish.” “Sit them down” and he feeds them.

We don't live in a world where we expect that sort of miracle, and if we've honest we struggle to believe. How can someone feed 5,000 people – actually 5,000 men, plus women and children – so what, 10, 12,000 people – even harder to get your head round. Five loaves and two fish – all those people. Wow. If Jesus is God, then that is perfectly possible.

Our miracles look different. My son has led the team that has supplied food parcels to the people of the North East. They have been supporting over 900 people every week, and have served about 17,400 meals. This is the chap who, as a teenager, made us courgette surprise – cold pasta and undercooked courgette – one of the worse meals I have ever failed to eat. There's a miracle, the Kingdom of God has been built.

Our miracles are the amazing things that people have done. Talking to parents in our churches, our schools - parents, who have coped with their children, coped with their jobs, coped with each other – I am in awe of them, in awe of you, you have built the Kingdom of God. You workers, who have struggled to keep your business going despite all the contradictory advice and instructions - I am in awe of you, you have built the Kingdom of God. You retired people, who have cared for each other, made phone calls, helped with supplies, been there for your children and grandchildren, loved and supported and listened - I am in awe of you, you have built the Kingdom of God. We need to hear the stories of the Kingdom, we need to hear the stories of God at work among his people.

12,000 people fed by our Lord. Tired, demanding people, demanding Jesus' help when he was coping with grief and suffering and death. When he must

have been at his lowest, when evil had executed his cousin, when evil seemed to have won.

And in the Kingdom, we will live with evil. When the evil of job losses surrounds our kids, our friends, our neighbours, we will be there. Sometimes just listening, sometimes giving practical support. When the evil of hunger flourishes, of being unable to feed the family on small wages or benefits, we will be there supporting our foodbank. When it's the evil of loneliness, or fear, or sickness, or death – we will be there.

We are here to fight evil, and we are here to help the kingdom grow. To say to this world, there is a better way, a more positive way, God's way. We proclaim that God made a beautiful world, a world to be celebrated, enjoyed, and loved. That's a challenge – if we love this world, we must care for it. The environmental crisis hasn't gone away. We caught a glimpse of a better world, a world with less traffic, with better air quality, where nature was starting to recover. Whether it's in the way we live our lives, the way we manage our churchyard, the value we put on things – God's speaks to us, his creation is "very good". That's a continuing fight.

We recognise the power of evil, and we fight it. We shout for justice, we stand against corruption, we realise the fear that leads people into evil. We acknowledge that human beings are sinners, nobody, ever, is sinless. We bring good news and forgiveness for all.

Because we believe, we know, that Jesus is sinless. He is the Son of God who came to this earth. He gave us a vision, he taught us, he died for us, he rose again, and he calls us into a personal relationship with him. That relationship, that forgiveness, means we worship – whether we worship in a building or by the power of a laptop – we worship. We come into his presence, into the presence of God, and worship, prayer and praise, his love and the relationship we have with him, that is what gives us the strength to work for the transformation of his world.

Normally we come together to the altar to take communion – and there is something so symbolic in that. Our walk to the altar, our kneeling before God, the words "the body of Christ, the blood of Christ", that means a lot. There is symbolism as we individually take the wafer, as we drink together from the cup. There is a symbolism as we go back to our seats, having taken Christ within us, we go out.

Today it is different. I will come to you. Because I will be getting close to you, I will put my mask on. I don't want to be dressed as a highwayman or a bank

robber – I have decided I will be the masked crusader, that has a better ring to it. I will simply put the wafer into your hands, and I am supposed to make sure I don't touch your hand. When I quietly say "The body of Christ" you may not hear me as I talk into my mask. No one can offer you wine, and that feels wrong. Then I move on, and you remain seated. We don't want conversation, we don't want interruption, but not all of us will be able to find the words (or the silence) to pray. We want normality, and communion this way is not normal.

30 years ago, when I was a very young Baptist Lay Pastor, I was asked to take communion to a lady who had multiple sclerosis. She hadn't been able to come to church for a few years, and home communion had rather fallen by the wayside when the church didn't have a pastor. I had had very little experience of taking communion outside church, and I was still young enough to be slightly embarrassed when I arrived for the first time to find she was having a bad day and couldn't get out of bed. Together we worked out the logistics of where to sit, whether she could manage to hold a wafer (just about), whether she could hold a chalice (no way) – how we actually managed to do communion. The first time, I'm not sure how deep a spiritual experience it was, but as I visited regularly we got into a good place, and that relationship – based on our shared communion – was very special for several years. We met Christ in our communion, and we were blessed – there's a lesson for us all in that story.

God is our Father and nothing can separate us from his love. Christ is with us, in the normal, the new normal, and the total utter chaos. The Spirit is at work in and through us all. To Father, Son and Holy Spirit be all praise and glory.  
Amen.