

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 18 Year A 2020

So often our reading and understanding of the gospel - and of Scripture in general – is compromised by the piecemeal way we approach it. So much of the meaning of a particular passage is lost by overlooking what surrounds it, what comes before and after it in particular, and its larger setting within an entire work. It's probably not possible (or even desirable!) to read an entire Gospel from beginning to end on any given Sunday. But that means the impression most of us are left with is of isolated, little stories patched together, but which stand pretty independently of each other, and which maybe don't have much to do with each other at all.

Take the Gospel placed before us today. Perhaps one of the best known and most familiar of all the gospel stories. And the way we normally hear it - as today – is in isolation. The story is so familiar to us in part because uniquely *all four* gospels recount at least one version of it. Few other stories - apart from those of the passion narrative - are common to all four gospels. And in fact, Matthew and Mark record *two* versions, so all up six different versions survive in the gospel record. So clearly a story which played heavily in the imagination of the early church, most likely drawn from an actual memory from Jesus' ministry. And recognised by diverse communities as representing something incredibly significant about his ministry.

So, it means that each of the gospel writers weave a diverse network of meanings around and through this story. And one of the ways we can pick up these distinct threads is to look at the context, to take note of what the evangelist – the gospel writer – places around (not only in) this story. By placing different accounts and narratives side by side, we find that each one speaks to and informs the other. Just so you get an idea of how the gospel stories are connected, at the outset of today's passage we hear how Jesus, *withdrew by boat* before he is confronted by the crowd. In the story that *follows* we hear, *Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd.* And then unfolds the account of the storm on the sea and Jesus walking on the water. In this case the activity surrounding the boat – a symbol of the church - is the thread which sews these stories together. So, these seemingly disparate accounts, through one simple detail, shows us that together that say something about our ecclesial life, the life of the church.

We will gain fresh insight into the story of the feeding of the five thousand by not letting it stand alone. For our purposes today, I invite you to notice what is placed *before* it. We get an important clue of what that might be in the outset of today's gospel portion. The opening verse acts as a sort of a bridge between what we hear today, and what went before. *When Jesus received the news of John the Baptist's death, he withdrew by boat to a lonely place where they could be by themselves.* What immediately precedes Matthew's account of the miraculous feeding is the account of the Baptists' death at the hands of Herod. The bridge between *that* story and the story we hear today is that little note of Jesus *receiving the news* of John's murder. It is appropriate to see Jesus receiving this news as a personal blow. At least from Luke's gospel we understand them to be relatives. Jesus receives Baptism from the hands of John. And it is quite possible that John's ministry was the springboard for Jesus' ministry. For this reason, he goes to 'a deserted place' to mourn perhaps, to take stock, and quite possibly to consider the risk to his own life. Speaking out and acting like John the Baptist would have a very definite end.

And so, this bridge, this link - an image of introspection and solitude - gives way to the feeding of the multitude. At first glance unconnected and quite distinct. But really, we need to carry the story of the Baptists' demise *into* the story of the miraculous feeding of the crowds. How so? Because of the play of contrasts at work here. Setting these stories side by side highlights these contrasts. I have spoken previously how this is such an important technique for the gospel writers. In the two 'panels' we are considering today, it is Herod Antipas and his dysfunctional household who is set against the figure of Jesus and his disciples. And the central motif that draws out the contrast between these *circles around the image of the feast*.

As Matthew tells us, John had been in prison for some time for accusing Herod of adultery with Herodias, his brother's wife. Herod *throws a feast* for his birthday, inviting his rich and powerful friends. Herodias' daughter dances before Herod at the feast, which arouses his pleasure, and he tells her she can have whatever she wants in return. In a depraved conspiracy between mother and daughter she asks for John's head on a platter, and Herod obliges her. Herod's feast is exclusive, a private gala for the rich and the powerful. What is on display is selfishness and lust. The dynamics at play in this household are so dysfunctional it can only end in violence. And indeed, it does, in the death of the blameless Baptist.

So, note then, the contrast between *that* cesspit of vice and corruption to the story we know and love so well. That is the background. That is story the evangelist wants us to carry with us as we come to the gospel portion today. And so, by way of contrast, we see how Jesus' feast is inclusive, a community picnic, a celebration in which there is enough for everybody and in fact more than enough! Here a meal borne of generosity and abundance. Here, a banquet which leads to life!

One of the temptations in the spiritual life is to imagine that it is the large, the spectacular, the glitzy and the impressive which must show the hand of God. It is a great threat to the spiritual life to be seduced by the promise of success, power and prestige. But how often is it that the large and successful lose sight of their vision, who neglect their duty, who turn inward and become dysfunctional. Bigger is not best. Might is not right. Yet even in the church we are seduced by the idea that worldly standards of success are how we ought to measure ourselves. And it means we can see the small, the fragile and vulnerable as failures, as marks of God's absence.

How often, then, we need to remind ourselves of the God *who consistently* – through all of Scripture, from beginning to end - chooses the small, the weak and unimpressive to further his plan, to lead to life! Nothing could be more unlikely than an executed criminal be the saviour of the world. Nothing could be more unlikely that humble bread and common wine become the enduring signs of his presence. In the consistent pattern of God's dealing with humankind five loaves and two fish really can feed so many.

In the face of so many challenges, when the need is so real, and we face the temptation to measure ourselves to worldly standards, we might say like disciples, *Look at our measly offerings! What good is that?!* We look around and say, *'Lord, we are only small, we don't have very much. Everything is against us at this time.'* Now, at this time, we *are* shrunk more than we could have imagined! But look to power, look to prestige, to the big and the impressive; look to the flashy and the spectacular, to success and where the centres of influence are, more than likely we will only find that which will suffocate and kill us. But in Jesus there is abundance and life, always life! If the Gospel tells us anything it is that the little, even the *very little* we have, God can use to his good purposes. At this time when we are small and little and vulnerable, we can *only* trust God. Trust anything else will only lead to disappointment. To step forward, to find life, we simply have to trust that God can use the little we have! Amen.