



Reflection by Rev'd Anne Burden

Eighth Sunday after Trinity
Mark 6:30-34, 53-End
21st July 2024

Our Gospel reading for today is in some ways an illustration of how difficult mission and ministry can be. It was demanding and exhausting for Jesus and the first disciples - and it still is today - regardless of the skills of those involved - and regardless of the rewards and satisfaction of carrying out the will of God and reflecting his love and care to those we meet.

As the passage begins, Jesus has reached the height of his popularity - and although his conflict with the religious authorities is only just beginning - it has not yet grown into full public confrontation. Jesus is seen as a teacher and healer - not yet as a political player. The crowds follow him everywhere, and Jesus knows that the people have pressing needs which they want to be satisfied urgently. They want healing and miracles - and who can blame them - life was tough for the struggling poor, just like it is for many people today.

Jesus treats the people who approach him with compassion and understanding. There is no sense that he waves a magic wand, as it were, from afar. He seeks to know people as individuals, and shows them the love he has for them. Jesus never turns people away. No wonder he becomes exhausted - as do the disciples when they return from their first solo mission. They're tired and hungry - and they want to tell Jesus all about what they have done and achieved. We call this a "debrief" nowadays, and recognise how important it is to talk and reflect with others as a way of coping with the pressures of mission and ministry, and to learn from the experiences it brings us.

Jesus seems to understand this very well - and tries to give the disciples the time and attention they need. He encourages them to rest and to take time alone - and with God. But this is not easy to achieve. People follow Jesus and the disciples everywhere, and their demands are relentless. This is an issue for those in our own times who are involved in the mission and ministry of the church - and that means, surely, all those who seek to live a Christian life. How can we care for others, and also care for ourselves so that we are able to carry on caring. Our Christian calling is to show others God's love - to accept his gift of love for us and to pass it on to others - 'to love as he loves us.'

This is reinforced - curiously enough - in the section of the Gospel passage left out in our reading today. You may have realised - or quite possibly not - that the first four verses of the Gospel reading are the beginning of the very well known story "The Feeding of the 5000". The crowd in the story consisted of those who had followed Jesus and the disciples when they were looking for peace and quiet in the desert. What they wanted however was to hear Jesus's teaching and witness his healing miracles. The disciples realise that the hour is late - and suggest that Jesus sends the crowd away so that they can find food. You know the story well, I'm sure - and Jesus's reply "You give them something to eat". Somehow - a very large number of people are fed and satisfied by a very small quantity of food - 5 loaves and 2 fishes. There have been many sermons preached which reflect on this strange happening - you no doubt have thoughts about some of them. But for our purposes today, the points I would like to underline are firstly - Jesus encourages the disciples to meet people's physical needs as well as their need for teaching, healing and compassion. Secondly the food for the crowd comes from the people themselves - someone or some people are willing to share. And thirdly, God's hand is present in the feeding whether it is physical feeding, or feeding of knowledge, companionship or care.

If you were hoping for advice and wise words about how to cope with the demands of mission and ministry - I'm afraid you are going to be disappointed. Gospel teaching always asks more questions than it answers - and that's your task for the days ahead. What we do need to hold on to is that God wants his healing love to reach everybody - and that the effort and engagement of people of faith is necessary for this to happen. Mission and Ministry is demanding and difficult, and can only be achieved by working together, supporting one another and caring for ourselves - always remembering that God will be with us - will meet us in the dark places when we seek him - and will strengthen our love with his greater power and compassion.

And that's quite enough from me!! The thoughts and prayers and actions are for our journeying in the weeks ahead - remembering that our strength comes from the God of love and care who will never leave us comfortless.