

Theme: The compassion of Christ

Today's sermon is on Mark chapter 6 verses 30 to 34 and 53 to 56. Verses 30 to 34 is the story of Jesus and the apostles trying to get away to a deserted place to be together to rest for a while after their travels, and to have something to eat but being interrupted by great crowds of people, who Jesus starts to teach about the kingdom of God.

Similarly in verses 53 to 56 is the story of Jesus and the apostles trying to escape the crowds but again being recognised and being surrounded by a large crowd of people who have brought their sick with them for healing. And sandwiched in between these two stories of Jesus and the apostles trying to find space for themselves, is the story of the feeding of the 5,000 with 5 loaves and 2 fish, and of Jesus walking on the water.

Now at the beginning of chapter 6 at verse 7 we are told that Jesus began to send the twelve apostles out two by two with authority over unclean spirits. He also ordered them to take nothing with them for the journey except a staff, and it is at verse 30 that the apostles start to tell Jesus of what had happened because of their actions and what they had said when on their journeys.

Before we explore verses 30 to 34 let me set the scene, the apostles at the beginning of chapter 6 had been given authority over unclean spirits, they had been given pre-Pentecostal powers, the power of the Holy Spirit had been made active in them as it had been in Elijah or Elisha, they cured people of their diseases and had proclaimed that all should repent of their sins and turn to God. When they returned, they gathered around Jesus, eager to tell him of their exploits, of their joy they had experienced, the joy they had given other people, and of what happened through them. They were like excited children telling their teacher of the wonderful things that had happened because of what the Holy Spirit had done through them, but underneath it all was exhaustion, they like Jesus had experienced endless crowds of people wanting their healing and to listen to their proclamations.

So, Jesus having listened to them, and been thrilled by what they had said and experienced, said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. Jesus had given them a glimpse of what it was like for him and what it would be like for them after he had ascended back into heaven and after Pentecost. He was also teaching them that there must be time for themselves and for God, that you cannot just keep going until you drop. Christians need to spend time with God as well as with people that's why he said, "Come away to a deserted place." Not because he thought they were fed up with people, but that they needed time with God, to be refreshed, and to be replenished. People cannot keep working if they do not get enough rest and sleep, and Christians cannot keep going if they do not take time out to be quiet, to rest, and be with God. Sadly, today it is almost impossible to find a spot at home to be quiet and thoughtful with all our electronic gadgets and televisions.

In verse 32 we are told that they went away in a boat to a deserted place, but people recognised them and saw them going, and those people ran ahead on foot and were there waiting for them when they got off the boat. There are times when a boat must go round a peninsular which can take hours whereas walking across can take only minutes. Now at this intrusion, remembering that they were exhausted before they rowed the boat to that secluded place, and that they still had not eaten, they would be dismayed with the sight of yet another crowd of people, now perhaps the apostles were but Jesus certainly wasn't. We are told that Jesus had compassion on them, and that was despite having his plans scuppered by the crowd; Jesus' energy, patience, and endurance, when dealing with people in need, was positively limitless.

This also gives us the answer to why people came in droves to see him, it was because of his compassion, the outflowing of his love, and his desire to heal and to restore people's bodies, minds, and spirit; miraculously peoples' health was restored, their secret worries were put to rest, and he brought wholeness reconciliation and peace where there was previously anxiety and stress. They also knew by his actions, and the authority with which he spoke about the kingdom of God that he was special and was at least a prophet sent from God.

And Jesus' compassion for them was like a shepherd for his sheep because they were lost and worried about the future like sheep without a shepherd. Now we need to understand that sheep without a shepherd 2,000 years ago in the Middle East was a life-threatening matter, it would almost certainly lead to the death of the sheep; those who did not get devoured by wild animals would probably starve to death. They relied on the shepherd not only to protect them from predators but also to lead them to fresh pastures where there would be enough grass to feed them, which is a good analogy of what would happen to us without Christ the good shepherd who is described so vividly in the 23rd psalm.

Sadly, we are not told what he taught those people who had journeyed around the lake to be close to Jesus, but for people who were feeling lost, scared, and unloved, like sheep without a shepherd, he may well have talked about the eternal love of God who is always watching over them, protecting them and who, if they follow him, will guide them through life and provide everything for their needs, and keep them safe. And there is a message here for us as well because when we feel lonely, lost, or unloved, then let us do what the crowd did on that hot day somewhere by the lake of Galilee, turn to Christ in prayer and listen to him, and be refreshed, and be assured that whenever we turn to Christ in prayer, Christ will always be there for us and he will never be too tired or too busy to walk alongside us and comfort us.

Now after they had fed the 5,000 with 5 loaves and two fish, they got into a boat to cross over the lake. On the way over a strong wind made rowing difficult, and while they were straining on the oars Jesus was seen walking on the water towards them, and when he got into the boat with them the wind ceased.

Jesus and the disciples came to land at Gennesaret, and it was there that they moored the boat. Now Gennesaret is a flat plain area between Capernaum and Tiberius on the western shore of the lake. Now of course under normal circumstances people cannot just get into a boat and cross the lake, because all the boats on the lake would be owned by someone, after all if we went to the Thames at Henley, we could not just get into any boat and cross over the river. But many of the apostles were fishermen, they not only had their own boats but probably knew everybody who did own a boat on the lake, so for them to just get in a boat and cross the lake was a natural and a possible thing to do. But when Jesus got out of the boat at Gennesaret, people at once recognised him. At this stage in Jesus' ministry there was no hiding place for him in Galilee, and verse 55 tells us that wherever he was spotted the people rushed about in that region finding and bringing there sick to him, and for those who could not walk they carried on mats to wherever he was heard to be.

And in verse 56 we are told that when he went into villages, towns or farms they brought the sick to him, and that many were healed merely by touching his cloak. Verses 53 to 56 also gives us a picture of the strength and closeness of the communities and their willingness to drop everything and to help each other who are in any sort of need. I am sure we all know how desperate we can be when we, or when someone we love becomes ill, there is little we would not do for them to bring them back to full health, and this is especially true when someone is going to die from their illness. As Christian carers some may turn to God in prayer for a miracle, while others may turn to God for strength to care for their loved one, and others for both a miracle and strength to care.

It is human nature to try and do the best for people we love so I have empathy for all those people who rushed about trying to get their sick to Jesus, because like them I would, and have done the same. The last verse tells us that even those who touched his garments were healed. Now the word healing for me can mean two things. Obviously, it can mean brought back to full health in the community, but for some people healing can mean being released from suffering and to be with Christ.

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