

SERMON, 8 AUGUST 2020 – Romans 10.5-15, Matthew 14.22-33

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

The feeding of the 5,000 was quite an eye-opener for the disciples. We looked at that passage last week – and a reminder that if you can't get to church, the readings and everything else are on the church website. 5,000 men says the gospel, plus woman and children, so what 12,000? – I'm just surprised no one has done a cartoon illustrating a socially distanced feeding of the 5,000. Ho hum! Trying to organise that would give us all something to worry about.

Imagine if you were a disciple, and you had to cope with 5,000, perhaps 12,000, people. Five loaves and two fish, and somehow they were all fed. Jesus the miracle worker, and I suspect the disciples found it as difficult to cope with as we do. What had he done, how had he done it, who was he?

While all the people were there, there wasn't really time to answer that question. We have a task to do, get them all fed, not time to think how we do it. How it happened really doesn't matter too much – the need was met, the hungry were fed, wow. As I said last week, miracles still happen today – and when miracles have happened, the people involved are shattered. My Harry said that on Friday night he had a beer after he finished work, then promptly fell asleep. In case I give the impression my son is a party animal, he said he was annoyed he was asleep before Gardeners' World – how middle aged is he?

A group of tired disciples, told to get in the boat, to cross the Lake. The Sea of Galilee is about 13 miles long and 8 miles wide – so that's further to sail than it was when we went to Orkney, though I suspect the Sea is usually an easier sail than the Pentland Firth. Several of the disciples were experienced fishermen, this was a normal evening journey. You can imagine a pleasant evening on board, some no doubt snoozing in the bottom of the boat after a hard day's work, and others sitting talking, trying to get their heads round what had happened, what they had seen Jesus do.

Jesus also needed some space. He dismisses the crowds – again, makes you wonder how one man can say goodbye to that many people. Presumably they were fed, content, and ready to head for home. And Jesus needs time and space to get his head round what had happened, what he had done – he needed space to pray. If you are constantly giving out, constantly meeting the demands of people, you need to be able to recharge. In other gospels the crowd are very demanding and want to make Jesus their king, they have seen in him an amazing leader, someone who will free them from the Romans, from the authority over them. Jesus has denied he is their King, but in doing that, in

recognising that his leadership is not the sort they want, he has to accept that his leadership is leading to the cross. That cannot be an easy thought, an easy path. You'll remember that, just before the feeding, Jesus had received the news that John the Baptist had been executed – he was in a fragile place. Sometimes moments like the Transfiguration give him the spiritual and emotion boost he needs, that knowledge he is doing God's work, walking God's path – at other times, I can relate to Jesus who needs space to re-connect with God.

When evening comes – which always seems a little odd, because I always assumed a late afternoon meal of loaves and fish – but no matter, when evening comes Jesus is praying, quietly, alone – and the disciples are in the middle of the Sea, battered by the waves, the wind against them.

This is an experience I have never had. I have never been on a small boat, battered by wind and waves. Last time I was out in a storm, I had the metal and windows of a good solid car between me and the elements. We are so protected – which makes us immune to the suffering and the danger of so much of the world's population. How many hours were the disciples hanging on to their boat, coping with the swell – difficult for the fishermen, horrendous for those who were happier on dry land.

Apparently it is the morning before Jesus walks across the water to them, and they are terrified. Humans do not walk across water. Humans cannot walk on water. This is unbelievable. It is a ghost – has he died, have we died? We are afraid.

Peter has more faith, perhaps – if it's you, call me. Yes, come on. Help, I'm sinking. It's such a wonderful, believable, reaction. "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

I cannot explain how Jesus can walk on water, I cannot explain how he can calm a storm, I cannot work out how he fed 5,000 people – but, actually, does that matter? Though I have never been in a boat in a storm, I have survived many storms in my life, and I can understand exactly what this one feels like. That swing from high to low – from an amazing meal, 5,000 people fed, the emotional high, to being in the middle of the Sea, in the middle of a storm, not actually caring whether you live or die. Yes, we understand those emotions.

We know how it feels when one man or – more usual in my case – one woman, has the strength to put out their hand and pull us out of the water, and then hug us and dry us and get us back in the boat.

We know what it feels like when Jesus does that – reaches out and meets our need. Some people have a very strong faith, and will tell you what the Lord has done for them, most of us – I suspect – are quite content with the Lord acting through human contact, when someone meets your need and you realise that in that person you have seen Christ at work.

The apostle Paul is, of course, a man of a very strong faith, quite content to tell his readers what the Lord has done for him. He stresses to all of us that personal element of faith. That faith is not a faith in the laws we keep, the rules we follow, the boxes we tick. It is not sufficient enough to be good, we are not good Christians if we are simply good Christians, we are men and women who follow Jesus Christ, who seek to do his will, who walk with him. He met Jesus in an amazing way as he rode along the road to Damascus, determined to crush this new, heretical, religion, and keep people in the straight and narrow of the Jewish faith, the faith God had given him. The power of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, the encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ, turned him upside down, turned him round, and made sure his life was never the same again.

You get the impression from the Acts of the Apostles, and from Paul's letters themselves, that he never had any doubt, never had any questions, always knew Jesus as an incredibly powerful presence in his life. We have all known religious leaders like that, we have all known fellow believers like that – and, usually, thank God for them. They give us an example, they speak to us of God's constant, untiring commitment to us, and his desire for us to have that deep, fulfilling relationship with him.

They also charge us, inspire us, empower us to reach out to others. To say that faith is necessary, that faith make sense, that God is at work in this world and needs us to recognise that. There is so much in this world that divides humanity from God, that blinds us to the need to have Christ in our lives, we need to be challenged, and constantly re-engaged.

But Paul's faith is not just in Jesus, in that person he has a relationship with, his relationship with Christ also changes how he sees God, how he sees God in everyone. There is no Jew or Greek, the same Lord is Lord of all. Surely that is the message we need to hear.

In some ways, Covid has brought people together. Most of us have talked to our families more than normal. Most of us spent more time than usual with the people we love – and I suggest that most of us have realised how fortunate we are. Many people know their neighbours better than they did before – and there are other positive things we can add to all that. We have seen good defeating evil.

But the battle isn't over. Evil will always fight against good, and we are called to stand up against evil. In the political arena – ensuring that the voice of the key worker is valued with something more than a clap, ensuring that decisions made are just, that corruption is rooted out rather than being allowed to flourish. Ensuring that those of us with influence and wealth – and yes, we are people with influence and wealth compared to most in this country, this world – use our resources, all that God has given us, for good. That is “good” – which is not necessarily “our good”.

Paul tells us that faith, that Christ, makes a difference. It must make a difference to how we live our lives, and if faith matters we want to share it with others. That's been made harder for those of us who use our buildings for outreach – who proclaim the gospel as we baptise, marry, welcome. After 25 years of saying “we're here for you” it is so hard when I'm saying “there is a limit of 30 people and we can't sing.” I am struggling to see what our future is.

Many churches have put worship on line, they say their worshipping community has increased, and some are in no hurry to reopen their buildings. They say they are finding new ways of being church, new ways of proclaiming the gospel – good for them. I have to have faith that God can work in all sorts of ways, and seek to find him wherever.

I love the way Paul quotes that passage from Isaiah – “how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news”. There is a sense of movement, of action, of urgency, of running, and of a good sensible walk. Julie's walking days may be long over, but has purchased a new powered chair which she has named Morgan – on Wednesday we had a day at Calke Abbey and walked five miles together. A new way of doing things together, quite an expense, but something to be positive about. Don't get depressed because she can't walk, rather find a new way of doing things.

This church has proclaimed good news since the Allestree yew was simply a seed. The men and women who have worked and worshipped here have prayed and cared and worshipped and worked through war, plague, famine, and so much else. The way they have worshipped has changed, the ministry has changed, the building has changed, the world has changed. The love of Jesus remains the same, and the call for us to share that love will never go away.