

SERMON – 25 JULY 2021 – EPHESIANS 3.14-21, JOHN 6.1-21

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



*“The Miracles of the Loaves and Fishes,” Jacopo Tintoretto,*

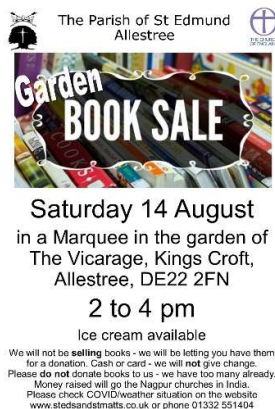
How lovely to have a good story for the Gospel – a story we know, but it says so much. We’re in Jesus’ home territory – and the fact that you’ve got fishermen as disciples is very useful when you need to cross the Sea of Galilee. The lake is about 8 miles wide. I am not enough of a sailor to know how long it would take to sail across – but I can understand how long it would take for the crowd to get round. It’s like walking round Carsington Water – the other side doesn’t seem far away, but it’s further to walk than you think it is.

“A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs he was doing for the sick.” In the days before doctors and medical care, you would follow and go anywhere for Jesus, because Jesus was the one who could heal – and no one else could. If you have a family member, a child perhaps, and you know that only Jesus can bring you wholeness – yes, you will be one of the large crowd following Jesus.

Interesting that John’s gospel uses the phrase “the signs that he was doing for the sick”. For them, sickness is less something that can be explained, it isn’t diagnosed as the result of a virus, an infection, whatever – it is the power of evil, a power opposed to the will of God. We would talk about mental illness, physical illness, we can diagnose it – in Jesus’ time, illness, mental illness especially, is the result of a demon, the result of evil, diametrically opposed to the will of God. It is to be fought, to be cast out.

I have no doubt that the apparent vast increase in mental illness in our country, especially among our young people, is partly explained by the lack of peace, the lack of security, the lack of something to believe in, the lack of someone to believe in. Love and peace and belief is missing. I have no doubt too that beauty, prayer, music, community – all these things fight the evil, and strengthen the love.

We know that this last year has vastly increased mental health problems – and as we made the decision to keep asking you to wear face coverings and socially distance, we had to balance the fight against the Covid with the fight against isolation and mental illness. It's not an easy balance. There will come a time when we can meet together, properly, more socially.



You can see in the magazine that we're hoping to have a church booksale on the afternoon of Saturday 14 August. This time we'll do it in a marquee in our garden – more fresh air, so you had better pray for sunshine. Rather than serve refreshments, I'm hoping we can get Just Ice ice cream to come. An afternoon together will improve our mental health, and the ice cream is more than a good idea. As I hope you know by now, Just-ice is wonderful ethical ice cream from a Christian company. To quote their website – “At Just-Ice we simply love making a difference. All the delicious ice cream and sorbets are about helping restore dignity, hope and a future for people who've been held in modern slavery in this country. As well as this, half of our profits go to existing charities who prevent, rescue and rehabilitate child soldiers anywhere in the world.” So as you spend some money on books and on lovely ice cream, we helped to heal the world. (What we're going to do, is make books and ice cream available for a donation – we won't be giving change. We'll accept cash or card. Diane says please, no donations of books – she has so many already).

*I'm also hoping that by next Sunday we will be able to organise to have coffee in our garden after the 10 am service – again, more fresh air than the church hall. We're looking at whether we can get a coffee van to come, that way we're not expecting volunteers to cope with all the rules – a coffee van can provide us coffee, again we'll ask for donations, and we will have chairs and tables out in the garden. I hope the weather is kind to us, and that you'll come down after the service. We can be sociable together – it's important.*



I wonder how sociable the crowd in the gospels were. I have heard this miracle explained away with the suggestion that once the lad got his loaves and fish out and offered to share them, then everyone else was shamed and did the same. You could argue that – but I am happy to go with Jesus the miracle worker. Jesus dealing with the practical needs of his people, being there for them.

I love the way that Jesus uses the loaves and fish from a boy – wouldn't it be great if we knew what impact that made on the boy. I can imagine Jesus sitting with him, asking if he could have his supper, multiplying it, and asking the lad to help distribute it. All of us have the opportunity to make a difference – in the way we welcome and involve young people – I'm sure one of the main reasons I am a Vicar is because I grew up in a church that valued me, used me, made me welcome, loved and prayed for me. Make people welcome, and not just young people – if we are not welcoming churches, then we might as well pack up and go home.



We have so much to give thanks for, and the first thing Jesus did was stop and give thanks. I don't know how you can feed 5,000 people, I wonder how you distribute that much food, I wonder what you do with all the fragments – the phrase “food waste” is one that's come into our vocabulary in recent years, well here is the original battle against food waste. I wonder if everyone left with a doggy bag!

All of this was done in the power of God, and in the name of God, and in the love of God. And people recognise his power – they know that he is the prophet come into the world. They knew about prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, so many who were part of their faith and their history. In recent years they had seen and listened to John the Baptist – and Jesus obviously had the power of God,

obviously in the same mould. “We need a leader, we need someone to drive the Romans out, we want God to be in charge, we want Jesus the King.”



That was not the way Jesus wanted to reign – so somehow he slips away, and you can imagine him on the mountain, by himself, perhaps struggling with God in prayer – what is his destiny – King or cross?

I suspect the disciples knew when to give him space, when to leave him alone – we’ll cross the lake, and meet him tomorrow.

They row, three or four miles – now, I can imagine that. The Boat Race course is 4.2 miles – that’s the boat race that Cambridge won earlier this year. Perhaps we should have a race – the Cambridge team versus a bunch of Galilean fishermen. A rough sea, we had another version of this story just the other week – and yet there is Jesus, walking on the water. Of course they were terrified. No one can walk on water – here is Jesus defying the very rules of the natural world. Humans do not float. Who is he? What is he? “It is I, do not be afraid.”

That is all the disciples need to know - “It is I, do not be afraid.”



There is so much to be afraid of in this world of ours’ – so we have to believe in the power of God, and the passage from Ephesians puts us into the context and the hands of God’s love, God’s power – the two go together. Paul had a privileged place in the Empire of Rome, he was a Roman citizen, but he had chosen to follow another power, another King. He followed Jesus the Messiah, risen and ascended. He had fought the powers of the world, fought the powers of evil, sometimes suffered appalling treatment at the hands of the powers of the world – he knew would die at the hands of the powers of the world – but he was convinced that the power of God, the power of Christ, the power of the Spirit, is

stronger. “Rooted and grounded in love” – because love is the power that cannot be defeated by death. The breadth, the length, the height, the depth – the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.

Accept that love, celebrate that love, show that love to others. “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.”

Peter Barham, 22 July 2021