



Weekly worship resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

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Today's reading

Mark 8: 1-21 (“Feeding the four thousand”)

In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, ‘I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance.’ His disciples replied, ‘How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?’ He asked them, ‘How many loaves do you have?’ They said, ‘Seven.’ Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed. They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. Now there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.

The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, asking him for a sign from heaven, to test him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit and said, ‘Why does this generation ask for a sign? Truly I tell you, no sign will be given to this generation.’ And he left them, and getting into the boat again, he went across to the other side.

Now the disciples had forgotten to bring any bread; and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. And he cautioned them, saying, ‘Watch out—beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and the yeast of Herod.’ They said to one another, ‘It is because we have no bread.’ And becoming aware of it, Jesus said to them, ‘Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?’ They said to him, ‘Twelve.’ ‘And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?’ And they said to him, ‘Seven.’ Then he said to them, ‘Do you not yet understand?’. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Give thanks with a grateful heart (CH4: 180) *Jesus loves me, this I know* (CH564)

O God, you are my God alone (CH4: 43) *My life flows on in endless song* (CH4: 565)

Look forward in faith (CH4: 237)

In the Name of the Father and of

Over the course of the last seven weeks, we have been running two discussion groups on Mark's gospel, the book of the Bible which the congregations of Gladsmuir and Longniddry are slowly working their way through, Sunday by Sunday over the course of 2020. These two studies offer an opportunity for 18 or so folk to gather and to chat about this tiny gem of a book. And many have been the insights which we have discerned together, whether concerning the nature of the gospel, or of Jesus, or of faith itself.

A couple of days ago we moved from the first half of Mark into the second half, as we advanced from the end of chapter 8 to the beginning of chapter 9. We are, as you can imagine, well and truly immersed in this ancient text, and we find ourselves looking forward to Christ's dramatic journey to Jerusalem and the many powerful Holy Week stories that all but fill that second half of the book.

So, you might well ask, what has been the big discovery for our Bible study groups so far? What single thing has occupied their attention more than anything else? I might be mistaken, but my perception is that participants have been most struck by the way Jesus teaches great truths to his 12 disciples, while the disciples ... well, the disciples, "just don't get it".

That's a phrase we find popping up in almost all of our chats, in words that are often phrased along these lines: "The disciples, they don't get it, do they? They didn't get it early on, and they're still not getting it now. Will they *ever* get it?"

What is it that the disciples fail to "get"? A brisk jog through Mark's gospel, chapters 4-8 quickly reveals the answer: whatever the inner circle of Jesus' male followers understand him to be, that understanding is very, very limited, and often, frankly, wrong. They seem to expect Jesus to be the great liberator of the Jewish nation, but their eyes and their ears and their own personal experience all conspire to send a different message – a message which has a great deal of trouble getting through those thick skulls and hardened hearts.

In that sense, of course, Mark gives us a tremendously human storyline to follow, as we come to realise that the disciples are just like us. Maybe in some weird way the disciples represent us – *are* us – as they in their age seem to hold so much in common with us in ours. They follow their own thinking, not God's thinking. They want to go their own sweet way, rather than trekking up the steep, rugged path taken by Christ. Does that sound familiar?

Mark's gospel poses several challenges, almost like riddles that are meant to engage our thinking and generate truths deeper than the printed word could ever contain. One of these strange puzzles is found in two almost identical stories: the feeding of the 5000 in chapter 6, and the feeding of the 4000 just a couple of pages later in chapter 8. If we compare them at a distance, we find a very real similarity: hungry crowds; no food; discoveries of a few loaves and fishes; miraculous transformations; plenty for all; baskets of leftovers. Yes, we can see the connections.

Only when we place each story under the microscope do we come to see a great long list of tiny details that mark out the differences that help us contrast the two. (Later on today set yourself this puzzle and just see how similar *and* how different the two stories actually are.)

Now bear in mind that the disciples are themselves key players in these two events. They were there, noticing the growing hospitality crisis, dealing with the food, gathering the scraps. They were witnesses to what Jesus had done, yet it seems that they had learned little.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

What are we to do with all this? Like the disciples we may be tempted to see the bread-and-fish miracles as acts of compassion done to fend off hunger (which they undoubtedly are).

But is this all there is? New Testament scholars argue over different nuances of meaning across the two accounts, reaching – it appears to me, at least – very few convincing, concrete conclusions. One issue that is worth looking at, however, is to do with the *settings* of the two feedings, because in the social geography of the locations we might find the clue we need.

First time round the scene is set in Jewish territory, among friends, in a place that is known and a culture that is friendly. Even the word for the 12 baskets used is a profoundly *Jewish* term. (And does their “twelve-ness” suggest to us the 12 tribes of Israel? Possibly.)

Moving on to the second account, we find a different location: we have moved over to “the other side”, away from the familiar and into the land of “them” not “us”. Yet we quickly come to see that people have a lot in common, no matter where they might be found.

Gentiles as well as Jews know what hunger is all about, and Jesus is there once more, ready to provide. And so we see that with Jesus, all are catered for, irrespective of faith or clan.

Is it mere coincidence that, near the end of this account, we find Jesus with his friends (once again on a boat about to sail for home) thinking ... about bread? In an often overlooked little detail, we see the disciples forgetting to buy provisions for their journey home. On board there is but one single loaf. When they mention this, Jesus responds with these words:

*‘Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?’ They said to him, ‘Twelve.’ ‘And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?’ And they said to him, ‘Seven.’ Then he said to them, ‘**Do you not yet understand?**’*

What are they failing to understand? What do they still “not get”? *Perhaps* (I put it no more strongly) they overlook the experience of their own lives that when you put Jesus together with even limited resources, amazing things start to happen. And *perhaps* they ignore the context of the two miracles: bread for the Jews *and* bread for the Gentiles.

What is a miracle? It is a wonder that guides those who witness it towards the reality of the divine. Imagine those disciples present, not once but *twice*, as those hoards are fed. Imagine them failing to learn the lesson of those gatherings. Surely we would be more careful.

Wouldn’t we? We might like to think so.

Still, perhaps we could find it within ourselves to concede that there have been times when we have probably been turned around in our daily living and pointed in God’s direction, only to dismiss such moments as wishful thinking or mere coincidence. Is there anything from your past that might have had the faint sheen of the miraculous about it, even for an instant, a fleeting moment that came and went?

The preacher, Martin B. Copenhaver, speaks of Jesus giving his friends, “a stunning glimpse of God’s power, and all they could see or remember was a picnic in the sun. I wouldn’t be so dim-witted. I wouldn’t miss a miracle like that. But then I remember that the word miracle literally means, ‘sign that points to God’. So, yes, I am still one of God’s holy fools, because I am quite sure that I miss miracles – signs that point to God – every day.” Amen.

Praying for others

*Sunday marks the birthday of the great Christian evangelist, writer and leader, John Wesley.
Here is a prayer which he wrote in the 18th century:*

I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what you will,
rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing,
put me to suffering.

Let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you,
exalted for you, or brought low for you;
let me be full, let me be empty,
let me have all things, let me have nothing:

I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours. So be it.

And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.'

Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers freedoms and responsibilities:

The weather over the last week has been truly summery. I went down to the beach and had a swim. Most of the year when I walk along the beach, it's just me and a couple of dog walkers, and the thought of going in the sea is less than appealing!

I love our quiet beach with its beautiful views across to the Lomond hills. I find it strange when it changes character in summer from cool and empty to warm and busy. But even on the busiest days you can easily keep many metres apart from other people. The beach is large and the folk on it number tens or, at the most, the low hundreds.

Though strange, it is good to see so many folk out enjoying themselves by the sea. Friends and families need to see each other face to face and the beach is a relatively safe place to do so.

We are fortunate to live close to the sea and yet still in a fairly quiet part of the world.

Scenes at Bournemouth beach earlier this week remind us that not everyone is so lucky. Many thousands of people descended on the area on the hottest day of the year so far. I thought it looked like people were trying to keep their distance from each other but it wasn't possible.

It was a stark reminder that this phase of dealing with Coronavirus may be the hardest. It is still a real threat but our need for contact with each other is so great we are finding it difficult to remember the threat. But we have a responsibility to do so – not for ourselves but for those who are most vulnerable to the virus.