

THE SUNDAY FOCUS

Weekly Worship from Gladsmuir & Longniddry Parish Churches

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Today's Bible reading

Mark 6:30-44 ("Feeding the Five Thousand")

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He 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. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognised them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.' But he answered them, 'You give them something to eat.' They said to him, 'Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?' And he said to them, 'How many loaves have you? Go and see.' When they had found out, they said, 'Five, and two fish.' Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

Jesus calls us here to meet him (CH: 510)

Sing of the Lord's goodness (CH: 157)

O Lord, thou art my God and King (CH: 100)

For the beauty of the earth (CH: 181)

What a friend we have in Jesus (CH: 547)

The gospel of Mark is a book which is all about those on the *inside* who don't understand Jesus and those on the *outside* who do. Back in 2020 we spent the best part of a year working our way through Mark's tiny little book, sermon by sermon, Bible study by Bible study. And during that time we met with a wide variety of biblical characters who encountered Jesus in humility and in faith, while his closest companions simply failed to recognise what was going on around them.

We met John the baptist, that rebel with a cause, who refused to conform to respectable standards, while ushering in a new age in which God's Kingdom would become real.

We met a man with a dreaded skin disease who was shunned by civilised society yet who engaged Jesus with these bold words of challenge: "If you want to you can make me clean."

We met a troubled man named "Legion" who lived in the land of the Gerasenes. The locals had bound him hand and foot in metal chains (no doubt convincing themselves and others that it was for his own good).

And let's not forget that here was an unnamed woman who had suffered from bleeding for 12 years. Made bankrupt by so much medical treatment which had proved to be no kind of a cure at all, she felt sure that Jesus could be trusted to help. "If I just touch his clothes," she said, "I will get well."

Faithful people, as found from Mark chapter 1 to Mark chapter 5. But today we find ourselves in Mark chapter 6, and that famous miracle: the feeding of the five thousand. This is a story of food, but it is really a story of so much more besides.

Let's take a look at this in the company of an expert to see exactly what we can draw from it. As we know from our current Lent Bible study series, biblical scholar Professor Walter Brueggemann has a very appealing habit of looking past the old familiar ways of Bible stories to reveal hidden gems which can enrich our faith. When it comes to this miracle, his starting point is the scene of the action: the wilderness. In different translations we find this location variously described as "a lonely" or "a deserted" place, far from the madding crowd. This is a cut-off, remote place in which Jesus and his disciples might find some much-needed rest. Yet even as they are disembarking from the boat which has carried them away from the people, Jesus witnesses the arrival of a crowd who are eager to meet this strange Galilean. Did the people expect a healer? Did they want to learn something new and important from a famous teacher? Or were they simply in search of a celebrity?

Whoever these people may have been, we are told that Jesus looked on them and his heart was filled with pity. And so these "sheep without a shepherd" found that they could rely on Jesus, their Good Shepherd for a day. He was exhausted though he was also willing to do what he could. He taught and he taught until the hour became late. But there was a big problem. This place, as we know, was lonely, so there could be nowhere to buy in much-needed supplies of food and drink, even if money had been in the purses of those 5000 hungry souls.

The most obvious thing to do (by standard, everyday human thinking) would be for Jesus the star host of a great public event simply to yell: "You've been a wonderful audience. My name's Jesus. Thank you and good night!" After all, what duty of care - what tiniest obligation or merest sense of responsibility - could he have had towards these waifs and strays assembled before him? Yet, as Brueggemann so helpfully points out, this story is a big, *big* story. And right at the heart of it we find, "Jesus transforming the wilderness into a place of nourishing plenty."

In the compassion of Jesus, the hunger of those many thousands of people there before him so obviously represented a human need which absolutely had to be addressed and satisfied. The crowd felt that hunger deep inside and Jesus identified with that hunger. Sadly, however, his disciples plainly failed to share his concern. Neither for the first time nor the last, these 12 companions simply could not understand what was going on around them. The need of the 5000 was invisible to them - or, perhaps, the plain, boring old practicalities of their need just got in the way. Consider the logistics of it all: miles from anywhere with no markets, no shopkeepers, not so much as an inn or a welcoming farmhouse. Little wonder then that the friends of Jesus looked around and saw only wilderness ... and hopelessness. What could they do? What could *anyone* do?

"This is a deserted place," they said, "and the hour is now very late; send them away ..."

The mindset of the disciples is a mindset of *scarcity*. By contrast, the mindset of Jesus is one of *plenty* - it is maybe even a mindset of heavenly abundance no matter the unlikeliness of hope. In the company of Jesus all it takes is for a plateful of loaves and fishes to be taken and blessed, broken and shared so that people *without* food can become people *with* food. And with hope. And with community. And with sufficiency and satisfaction.

The disciples' understanding of scarcity is all they need to prove to themselves that abundance simply has to be impossible. But not so with Jesus. For him, the line which the world takes (and has always taken) on "the-haves-versus-the-have-nots" is a bare-faced lie and a blight upon humanity. Here's how Brueggemann puts it:

"The story we tell about scarcity is a fantasy. It is not a true story. It is a story *invented* by those who have too much to justify getting more. It is a story *accepted* by those who have nothing in order to explain why they have nothing. That story is not true, because the world belongs to God and God is the creator of the abundant life. All of us are invited to be children and practitioners of this other story. We act it out in ways that disrupt our society, even as Jesus continues to disrupt our world of scarcity with his abundance." [Emphasis added.]

Only last week in church we heard from Kerry Reilly about the amazing, almost incredible work of the YMCA across Europe in their engagement with Ukrainian refugee families and individuals who are fleeing from terror, even as we speak. We heard what Kerry had to say and we were deeply moved by it. Before, we might have asked the question: "What could *we* do? What could *we* do in the wake of an unspeakably cruel and brutal invasion of a peace-loving nation by a tyrant and his huge forces? What could *we* do?" That is a question which has *scarcity* at the very heart of its thinking.

For us to think as Jesus thinks doesn't take an enormous shift in thinking. Only a tiny shift in emphasis: "What *could* we do? What *could* we do to show real love and real concern in the midst of such appalling suffering and grief and outright human misery? What *could* we do?" That is a question which has *abundance* at the very heart of its thinking. The real issue for us - right now - is to determine which of these two questions we are choosing to ask ourselves. In short, what is *our* emphasis?

As Walter Brueggemann so clearly points out to us and to anyone else who might listen: "All of us are invited to be children and practitioners of this other story. We act it out in ways that disrupt our society, even as Jesus continues to disrupt our world of scarcity with his abundance." Amen.

Praying for others

God of abundance,
we open our papers and listen to news bulletins
seeing such wickedness in a world in which
the strong prosper while the weak perish.
And we find ourselves feeling helpless in so many ways.
May we look upon our sisters and brothers who are
fleeing oppression in Ukraine, and may we find our place
in your abundant response.
Grant us the vision and the inspiration to find creative ways of
engaging with human need at its most basic level.
Show us the unlikely model of community
which Christ hands to us on a plate: five loaves and two fishes.

A prayer of Walter Brueggemann:

We are constricted by stories of scarcity.
Break through these false tales with the surprising truth of your shalom,
and then perform your story of generosity over and over again.
Amen.

And finally ...

Abigail Morrison considers how to help Ukraine:

Last week our own Kerry Reilly, Chief Executive of YMCA Scotland, came and spoke in our services about the work the YMCA is doing to help Ukrainians. YMCA Scotland has sister organisations in Ukraine and Poland and elsewhere in eastern Europe. They are working very hard to help support Ukrainians who have had to flee their beloved homeland and those who have been displaced within Ukraine. Kerry's talk has prompted many of you to ask what the church can do to help. And Longniddry's kirk session have come up with two things.

The first is that the session agreed at a special meeting on Thursday evening to donate £10,000 of church funds to YMCA Scotland to help their work with Ukrainian refugees and those internally displaced in Ukraine. But if you would like to make your own donation you can do so online via this link:

<https://ymcascotland.beaconforms.com/form/d75f88eb>

The second is that we will run a campaign to collect shoeboxes filled with goods needed by Ukrainians. This will operate exactly like the Blythswood campaign we run every autumn. Simply get a small box or a small backpack (it can be second hand) - think small enough for a person to carry easily. Fill it with goods. Drop it off at church by Sunday 24th April and we will get them to the YMCA. The boxes do not need to be gift wrapped but they do need to be closed with an elastic band and to have the ticked-off content list stuck to the top. Printed copies of the list will be available in church from Sunday. The list of what should go in a box will shortly be placed on the church website, to be found here :

<https://www.longniddrychurch.org.uk/shoebox-and-backpack-appeal/>