

PENTECOST 9A 02-08-2020 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Genesis 32.22-31; Psalm 17.1-7, 16; Romans 9.1-8;

*Matthew 14.13-21*

*Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

Jacob was afraid of his brother Esau. He had tricked Esau out of his inheritance and they'd gone their separate ways, and both had become wealthy and powerful. As today's story from the book of Genesis begins, Jacob is on his way to meet Esau and he's scared stiff.

He sent a ridiculously extravagant number of animals ahead as gifts for his big brother: goats, sheep, camels, cows, and donkeys in the hundreds, hoping Esau would accept him and not start a fight.

He even sent his wives and children ahead of him and stayed on his own for a night. What a brave man, to send his family into a dangerous situation he himself didn't want to face.

Then the scripture simply states that 'a man wrestled with him until daybreak'; but it becomes clear that Jacob was wrestling not with another human person but with God.

At the end, he was given a new name: Israel, and he walked with a limp from that day on.

Have you ever wrestled with God? Have you ever spent a restless night, trying to figure out what God was asking you to do? Have you had those tough internal arguments as you wrestle with a hard decision?

This story has caught the imagination of many, as an image of our universal struggle to find our place in the world and our relationship with the Divine.

Jacob- Israel- was changed by his dark night, as the injury that caused him to limp demonstrates. We are changed as we wrestle with God; in fact we are changed by all our engagements with God. Whenever we go to God in prayer with open hearts, when we read the scriptures with open minds, when we come to the Lord's Table with open hands, we are changed.

When Jesus heard the news that John the Baptist had been murdered by Herod, he went off in a boat to spend time by himself. I wonder if Jesus wrestled with God that night, as he did in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Imagine the effect of this news on him, as he grieved for John and wondered whether he would be next on the hit-list. John met his grisly end because he spoke truth to power, as did Jesus whenever he told the people in charge to change their ways.

When he went ashore, the crowds were there to meet him: that was the end of his alone-time. Jesus had compassion on them, seeing their need, and he ministered to them throughout the day.

When it was evening his disciples got restless. Perhaps they had a little meeting and thought they'd better tell the Boss it was time to go home for dinner and he should send all these people off to buy their own food.

This seems perfectly reasonable. In our world, if we were having a meeting and I was going on a bit, and one of the parish councillors whispered in my ear that it was lunchtime, I expect I would say, "Oh sorry- of course! Time to wrap it up people, off you go, see you later".

Jesus didn't do that. He said- YOU give them something to eat. The disciples checked to see what food they had, and it was evidently not enough even for the twelve of them, let alone for thousands of people.

What do you suppose the disciples thought as they looked at their meagre supplies, and then at that vast crowd of people? 5,000 men plus an uncounted number of women and children; how could they possibly fill such an overwhelming need?

We know what happened next. All four gospels contain this story, the only miracle that is in each of them. Some scholars think the early church might have re-told this story each time they met for communion, which it foreshadows as Jesus blessed and broke the bread.

Jesus didn't only talk about the kingdom of God, he lived it and enacted it. This story contains no teaching, no parables; just action and example. It is both a gospel call to social action- feeding the poor- and a demonstration of the holy mystery that is the Eucharist.

In the alternative world of the kingdom, compassion means responding to need without any expectation of reciprocity. The hungry are fed because they are hungry; they don't have to pay or work for it, they don't owe a debt, they don't have to prove they deserve it- they are just fed.

One commentator has written, "Serving the weak and feeding the hungry on the basis of need and compassion show the way things are when God rules."

Matthew presents us with two contrasting scenarios here. First is Herod's lavish birthday party, when he had John executed to save face in front of his guests.

Then there is a grassy hillside with thousands of ordinary people, sitting down and eating bread and fish together until they were all full.

Our world, sadly, resembles Herod's kingdom more than Jesus' alternative. In our world the rich and powerful do all they can to become richer and more powerful, while the poor are left outside in the cold. The global pandemic has clearly demonstrated the contrast between the haves and the have-nots, as around the world many of the people who have died or been very ill are from poor and disadvantaged communities.

In economic terms it is the people in precarious financial circumstances who are suffering: people in casual work, those who have lost jobs, older people who may never find another job and young people who can't even get a start.

In our world people must jump through hoops to prove they deserve help; in Jesus' alternative world, need is met with compassion and generosity.

As individuals, families, communities, and countries we need to wrestle with our sense of powerlessness in the face of need on a massive scale. As we try to work out the part we have to play in bringing about the kingdom, the alternative world Jesus showed us, we can wrestle with God singly and together, asking God to change our hearts and our ways. This is the beginning of mission.

The Lord be with you.