

Sunday 2nd August 2020

Call to worship

Gracious God, I am open to your Spirit this day.
Change, inspire and uplift me, O God, to be attentive to how you are speaking to me today.
In Jesus name, we bring ourselves to worship, Amen.

Hymn All my hope on God is founded

1 All my hope on God is founded,
He doth still my trust renew;
me through change and chance he guideth,
only good and only true.
God unknown,
he alone
calls my heart to be his own.

2 Human pride and earthly glory,
sword and crown betray our trust ;
what with care and toil we build them,
tower and temple fall to dust.
But God's power,
hour by hour,
is my temple and my tower.

3 God's great goodness aye endureth,
deep his wisdom passing thought :
splendour, light, and life attend him,
beauty springeth out of naught.
Evermore,
from his store
new-born worlds rise and adore.

4 Daily doth the mighty Giver
bounteous gifts on us below;
his desire our soul delighteth,
pleasure leads us where we go.
Love doth stand
at his hand,
joy doth wait on his command !

5 Still from earth to God eternal
sacrifice of praise be done,
high above all praises praising
for the gift of Christ his Son.
Christ doth call
one and all :
ye who follow shall not fall.

Robert Bridges (1844–1930) (*alt.*)
based on Joachim Neander (1650–1680)
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Opening Prayers

Lord of compassion, we direct our attention to you knowing that you are always attentive towards us. Thank you for your love which sustains us and your grace that restores us.
Forgive us for the ways we have fallen short in our love and grow in us a desire to be more like you.
Let your words of grace ring out to us, that when we ask, our sins are forgiven.
Jesus among us, we thank you for your presence and the work of your Spirit within us.
That you promise to be with us and grant that we are never alone.
Thank you for drawing us to you through your love and illuminating our hearts and minds with your truth.
Father over all, the whole of creation witnesses to your great works and rejoices in who you are.
You are worthy of our adoration and we join our voices to bring you our praise.
To you belongs all glory and splendour and we magnify your holy name. Amen.

Reading Matthew 14:13-21 - Feeding the Five Thousand

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷ They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸ And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken

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pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Reflections on the readings:

The story of the feeding of the five thousand in Matthew 14.13-21 is very well known. Rather than exploring the question of whether it was a miracle or not, let's think about this story in relation to two distinct current concerns:

- 1) Coronavirus social distancing, and
- 2) Food waste.

Social distancing

We've all probably had a recent experience of avoiding crowds. Maybe you avoided crowds anyway, but most people have been alone far more often than before during the experience of lockdown and global pandemic. Maybe hearing the story of a crowd of five thousand (actually, that was just the number of men) makes you shiver, especially as they were passing food around.

My heightened awareness of hygiene and virus spreading since March has caused me to read this story in a new light. I can imagine a photograph of the scene in an angry news headline or Facebook post.

Of course, the situation was different then. It was very different here in February this year, yet alone in Jesus' time. But it made me wonder – what would be different if that act of Jesus' ministry had to comply with social distancing in an outbreak of Coronavirus?

Would Jesus have ignored the need to keep social distancing and held the gathering anyway? How are you feeling about gatherings and churches services?

The scale of the event is astonishing: there were probably around 15,000 women and children there as well as the men. The people, the masses, had a hunger to connect with Jesus and be restored, as well as a physical hunger. And Jesus fulfilled both needs.

If he couldn't minister to them all in one gathering, how would he have managed? I think that the only way would have been to enlist helpers, to create a team, to spread the load. That would require a large group of people to act in his power and authority and do what Jesus himself would have done: restoring brokenness and feeding the hungry. Maybe they could start a chain; one act of grace empowering the recipient to go and be a channel of grace to someone else.

Food waste

This passage in Matthew is unusual in that it gives us quite a lot of numerical facts. These numbers tell us a couple of things.

Firstly, the food was multiplied in an astonishing way. One loaf became a thousand loaves. It wasn't a measly, rationed affair – it was wild and abundant. Everyone had ample. I wonder if they had to contend with gluten intolerant people in that crowd? Or is that just an issue in our society today? Whatever the case we are told that everyone ate and was satisfied that day.

Secondly, there was very little waste. It seems that the amount of food provided was spot-on. Plenty, but not excessive. This tells us something about the nature of God; given that hunger and poverty was rife in the society at the time, to generate surplus food would have been an insult to those who went without that day.

So today picture yourself as the small child who gave his picnic to Jesus. How will you respond? Do you keep everything for yourself? Do you pretend you haven't heard? Do you dismiss that what you have is so insignificant that it can't be of any use at all? Or do you say Here I am – May I follow your way.

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Reflect on our current situation, our church, the building that we worshipped in, the needs of those around us in our community.

Bring to mind all that you are feeling and thinking about these situations.

Now ask God how you can help? What is your part to play? Are you holding back or freely offering?

Prayers of intercession

We take as our refrain for our prayers of intercession the phrase May we follow in your way, O God, an acknowledgement that as we pray, we seek also to be changed, to be motivated to act.

Let us pray.

God of all grace, we bring you ourselves. We bring you our lives, as they currently are, with all that is broken and wrong, but also much to be grateful for and to celebrate. Use us, O God, to build your kingdom, to seek peace in our world, to build communities of love.

May we follow in your way, O God.

God of all grace, we bring you our churches, caught in this strange 'in between' time, as we reflect on the painful experiences of lockdown, and how we can best serve our communities and our world in the months ahead. Show us how to create safe spaces, spaces where people can grieve, can find healing, can meet with you and be transformed by your grace.

May we follow in your way, O God.

God of all grace, we bring you our nation, 2020 has been – and will continue to be – a difficult year for us as a country. This year of Coronavirus, but also a year where we have discovered much underlying injustice and pain. We bring to you all who have been working overtime to see us through this time of crisis, and all who will need to work overtime as we seek to rebuild our communities, our economy, our relationships and our livelihoods. We bring you our leaders and all who must face difficult decisions or face up to inadequacies in our systems exposed by the process of lockdown and pandemic. Show us how to be a people of grace.

May we follow in your way, O God.

God of all grace, we pray for our world. As we look out on a global pandemic, and a world in which we have gone backwards in tackling poverty and reaching those most in need during this time of pandemic, which has affected the most vulnerable in our world more than many of us.

As we rebuild, show us how to build a world in which every person's needs are provided for. A world where every person's potential is fulfilled.

May we follow in your way, O God.

May I follow in your way, O God. Show me what is mine to do.

We bring this, and all our prayers, in Jesus' name, **Amen.**

Hymn Lord your church on earth is seeking

Lord your church on earth is seeking

Your renewal from above

Teach us all the art of speaking

With the accent of your love

We would heed your great commission

Sending us to every place

Preach, baptise, fulfil my mission

Serve with love and share my grace.

Freedom give to those in bondage

Lift the burdens caused by sin

Give new hope, new strength and courage

Grant release from fears within

Light for darkness, joy for sorrow

Love for hatred, peace for strife

These and countless blessings follow

As the Spirit gives new life

In the streets of every city

Where the bruised and lonely dwell

Let us show the Saviour's pity

Let us of his mercy tell

In all lands and with all races

Let us serve and seek to bring

All the world to render praises

Christ to you, Redeemer King

J Montgomery

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Blessing

Guide us, great Jehovah, as we seek to respond to your love to us. Help us be a shining example of love in a world crying out in need. May we be Christ's hands and feet, by the power of your Spirit. Amen.