

The beginning of our Gospel reading today is always so poignant to me: “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.”

The thing Jesus had heard that made him want to go away by himself was that his cousin, John the Baptist, had been beheaded by Herod. We don't know much about the relationship between Jesus and John, but we do know that John baptised Jesus, and that John steered his followers towards Jesus by proclaiming him as the lamb of God, the promised one.

The news that John had been imprisoned and executed for preaching the message of repentance was probably extremely difficult for Jesus to hear. It would have been a stark reminder that prophets are a threat to the powers that be, and of the constant current of threat surrounding anyone who didn't kowtow to empire. And on a personal level, John was his cousin, and someone who had prepared the way for Jesus' own ministry. It's not surprising that on hearing this news, Jesus wanted to get away for a while.

So he withdraws in a boat to a deserted place by himself – to pray, to grieve, to find again his courage perhaps, or to reconnect himself to his identity and purpose. He needs space. And what happens? The crowd finds out where he's gone and they go after him, walking to the place that Jesus had travelled by sea. Their need and determination are expressed in so few words, but are so palpably obvious even to a reader at a distance of centuries.

It's easy to put ourselves in Jesus' shoes here, and groan inwardly at the sense that there is no rest for him, that other people's desperation and demands follow him wherever he goes, that there's no getting away to meet his own needs even in a time of deep sorrow.

But I think it's probably more fruitful to position ourselves with the crowd in this story, and to get in touch with the hunger that drives them, and us. Because this is a story about hunger in all its forms. Yes, there's a miracle involved, with the multiplication of loaves and fishes. But in Matthew's gospel the miraculous part is pretty understated. The thing that really stands out is the fact of the crowd's hunger, and Jesus' *willingness* to meet it, and his *ability* to meet it even though it is apparently beyond the resources at hand. This story is also about the disciples learning that they can feed people from a place of compassion and the power and blessing of Jesus, even if it doesn't look like they have much to give.

How hungry are you? What are you hungry for?

This crowd that followed Jesus were hungry indeed...hungry enough to follow Jesus on foot and wait for him on the shore. These people are connected with their longing and their need for Jesus' healing touch. Jesus sees them waiting for him before he lands, and instead of turning the boat to go to some other place where the crowd couldn't reach him, he responds with compassion – he comes ashore and cures their sick.

The people in this crowd knew what they needed, they needed it desperately, and they were willing to leave their homes and travel to a deserted place to get that need met. They had seen and heard in Jesus the promise of healing, the promise of being filled. There's a determined trust in their decision to follow him in search of the fulfilment of their deepest yearning.

The second part of the story, the physical feeding, repeats and expands on the first part. It's near nightfall and the disciples want to send the crowds away to buy their own food. I think that for Jesus, this is an opportunity to teach the disciples what it means to respond to hunger. "They need not go away, you give them something to eat," he tells them, and then takes the little resource that they have and expands it, through prayer and blessing and sharing, into food enough for the entire crowd.

Jesus is not willing to send away truly hungry people to fend for themselves. They had made themselves vulnerable by following after him, and he was willing and able to nourish and satisfy them, physically and spiritually. He shows this by coming ashore to be with the crowd and heal them, and by meeting their physical hunger too. The feeding miracle comes from a place of seeing the humanity in the crowd and wanting to respond in a way that made them feel seen, important, and truly fed on every level.

Sending them away to buy food might have been a practical solution, but it doesn't align with Jesus' deeper awareness of the crowd's need to be together, and to be with Jesus, and to receive all that he had to offer them. In their poverty, their desperation and vulnerability they needed a deep expression of hospitality, to receive a tangible gift of grace, not just the cure of disease and the ability to go away and buy food.

Jesus doesn't do miracles to attract people or inflate himself, or to prove anything. The miracle is secondary to Jesus' great love for people who know they are stuck, struggling, lost and needy.

Jesus is still, now, today, responding to hunger with compassion. The trouble is, not many people are willing to name our hunger or reach out to be filled. We feel awkward about expressing our loneliness, our emptiness, our hidden stresses, our need for healing. And those who are literally struggling to put food on the table often feel deep shame at naming their physical hunger and poverty.

What are you hungry for? Do you feel that Jesus can meet you in your hunger?

The community of the church is a place where we can name our hunger in all the forms that it takes, and also where we try our best to respond to hunger in Jesus' name. The same Jesus who blessed and broke the loaves and handed out the fish to the crowd feeds us here at this table with himself. Are you in touch with your soul's deep hunger when you come forward to eat and drink? The bread and wine are a fragment and sip, but they are for us the body and blood of Jesus, to feed and heal us in the place of our need.

This same Jesus also builds us, around this table, into a body that will look with compassion and respond with action to the many, many people who are hungry in our world.

Has Jesus fed you? How do you feed others? And how do you feed them in a way that honours and acknowledges their importance as people, their need for community, not just representatives of a problem to be solved?

Five loaves and two fish. Sometimes we can get distracted by what we don't have, how under-resourced we are to respond with compassion to the needs of others. Let's remember that in Jesus' hands, a small offering can grow to meet the hunger of a large crowd. Amen.

Discussion – What thoughts and feelings have arisen for you in reflecting on this scripture? Can you begin to articulate your hunger?