

Isaiah 55:1-5 Matthew 14:13-21

The Gospel reading today begins with the words, 'when Jesus heard this'. You may well be thinking 'When Jesus heard what?' Well, what Jesus had heard was the news of the death of John the Baptist. For Jesus, this wasn't just the news of the death of another servant of God's kingdom – this was personal. After all, his mother Mary was related to John's mother Elizabeth and the two women had supported each other during their miraculous pregnancies. And Jesus' reaction to the news of his relative's death is to withdraw by himself, to a deserted place. I find that very moving – Jesus knows what it is to need time and space to process shock and grief. So if the past few months have brought you distress and trauma, you can maybe find comfort in the knowledge that Jesus truly does understand what you're going through.

But Jesus was not able to spend much time alone. He was pursued by large crowds of people – people who were searching for something – and whatever that something was, it was important enough to bring men, women and children away from their daily concerns and into the Galilean countryside. Some of those needs were obvious – the passage tells us that Jesus healed those who were sick. I wonder what the others were looking for? Perhaps they didn't even know themselves. Sometimes people just go along with the crowd – if there's something happening, they don't want to miss out. Perhaps they had a vague sense of something missing – a feeling of dissatisfaction that they couldn't even explain to themselves.

Whatever their motives for joining the crowd, I suspect many people will have marvelled at the miracle, eaten the food and then gone home largely unchanged by the experience. It's all too easy to get taken up with the demands of everyday life and to miss the fact that there is a bigger picture. In the past few months, people have had an opportunity to reassess their lives. Many people have come to realise just how important contact with family and friends is. One businessman wrote an article saying that he now saw that the long hours being 'seen to be present' at the office meant that his children were left with scraps of his attention under the guise of 'quality time'. Churches have reported large numbers of people logging on for online services. It remains to be seen whether the insights and behavioural changes of our pandemic era will lead to long-term changes. As I say, it's all too easy to get taken up with the demands of everyday life.

We know that the crowds continued to follow Jesus. Some wanted to make Jesus king – they wanted to make political capital out of his popularity. Some simply wanted more material provision – and Jesus recognised that and told the crowds: ‘You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.’

There’s evidence that even the disciples failed to see the bigger picture. When Jesus said a while later, “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees,” the disciples started saying to themselves ‘It’s because we forgot to bring bread.’ And you can almost imagine Jesus with his head in his hands as he says, ‘How can you not know that I wasn’t talking about bread?!’

Jesus had to tell them that they were missing the point. The miracle of bread and fish was not simply about food. The Pharisees and Sadducees were very keen on rules and regulations, on telling people where they were wrong and where they were failing to measure up – the miracle was a sign, a demonstration that God extends a generous welcome to all who come. The whole crowd – men, women and children, without distinction – were invited to come near, to sit, to share in the food. The disciples should have recognised the symbolism of the bread – it was a common belief amongst the Jews of the day that the coming of the promised Messiah would be accompanied by a repeat of the miraculous provision of manna in the desert, like that which the people of Israel had experienced during their journey to the promised land.

Later, it seems, the disciples did realise that Jesus was doing more than providing for people’s physical needs. The feeding of the five thousand is the only miracle (other than the miracle of the resurrection) which features in each of the four Gospels. And in three of the four accounts we have the same sequence spelled out: Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it and gave it to the disciples. Where have we heard that before? Well, of course, it’s in the accounts of the Last Supper – that enduring symbol of Christ’s self-giving *for* all, freely offered *to* all.

What, then, is the right response to this provision? I think there is a clue in today’s reading from Isaiah. The passage is striking in its repetition of the word ‘come’. The prophet, on God’s behalf, is offering an open invitation – come and share the good things God is offering. Nobody is left out because the invitation is free for everyone.

And along with ‘come’, the other repeated word is ‘listen’. We need to pay attention. Isaiah says ‘Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does

not satisfy?' As we've already noted, we can be so taken up with everyday life that we don't even recognise our dissatisfaction. We're familiar with physical hunger and thirst, but we're less well attuned to spiritual emptiness. God invites us to pay attention, to accept the invitation to experience life at a deeper level.

You might say – quite reasonably – 'That's all very well, but what does that look like in my everyday, 21st century life?' So let me make one suggestion that may help us pay attention to God's voice and recognise the good things that he offers us. It's a practice called the Examen that was first popularised by Ignatius Loyola back in the 16th century, but many people still find it helpful today. You will find various versions of it on the internet. The simple version that I was taught goes like this: at the end of the day, you look back and ask yourself two questions. The first is, 'When did I feel closest to God today?' It may have been when reading the Bible or listening to a Christian song. Equally, it may have been in contemplating the beauty of the natural world or enjoying the company of a friend. Identifying that moment, can help us begin to recognise God more clearly in our daily lives. We start to tune in to the ways in which we as individuals are best able to hear God. The other question we can ask is 'When did I feel furthest from God?' That may lead us to something we need to confess, or it may alert us to a seemingly harmless habit which is getting in the way of us connecting with God.

God's invitation is open to all: come – receive freely. My prayer is that God will help each one of us to learn to listen, to pay attention and respond joyfully to that invitation.