

“THE BIG PICNIC (Mark 20)”
Mark 6:30-44

After last week’s little interlude, in which we were entertained by the antics of the Herod family, Mark brings us back to the main story – the life and ministry of Jesus. The good news of the Kingdom of God is spreading, despite the fact that there is opposition from the religious leaders and, as we saw last time, from the ruling classes as well. Jesus’ core group of disciples – here called “*apostles*” for the only time in Mark’s story of Jesus – return from their first mission into the towns and villages of the Galilee region. They went out to proclaim the good tidings that the Kingdom of God foretold by the prophets was being inaugurated and to invite people to accept on trust Jesus’ new agenda for life. They were commissioned to confront the forces of evil and liberate men and women from their power. And they were authorised by Jesus to bring to reality the promise of wholeness and healing which is at the heart of the Kingdom.

And it seems that there is much to talk about. But once again, the popularity of Jesus and the curiosity of the people mean that Jesus and his friends cannot even get to eat together in peace, so they decide to go somewhere a bit quieter and hop into the boat to sail around the lake to a more “*solitary place*”. The eagle-eyed in the crowd manage to work out where they’re off to and hurry round the lake shore to head them off when they arrive. So the scene is set for The Big Picnic – a feast, which is one of the major metaphors for the fulfilled Kingdom of God. Again and again in the Bible the Kingdom is referred to in terms of a feast – often, but by no means always, a wedding feast. This al fresco meal is a real expression of that. And Jesus is the one who enables it to happen.

But this occasion has a kind of timeless dimension to it. There are interesting echoes here of other situations which would have rung some bells – albeit perhaps rather faintly – in the minds of those who were there and those who read about it later on. The idea that Jesus should be providing food seemingly from nowhere for these people out in the middle of the countryside looks back both to Moses and the experience of the people of Israel in the desert on their way out of Egypt, and to Elisha who miraculously provided food for a hundred prophets in *2 Kings 4:42-44*. In a sense, then, Jesus is continuing the work of “the Law and the Prophets”, the tradition of the people of Israel. But, as we’ve already said, this looks forward, too, to the feasting of the Kingdom of God on the “Day of the Lord”. In a way, this is a reminder of the timelessness of God’s provision for his people.

And at its heart, at the crossroads of history with a backward glance to the history of God’s grace to Israel and a forward look at the extending of that grace to all humanity, is the figure of Jesus, the man who has come to announce the changes and to proclaim the good news. He arrives on the lake shore with his weary band of friends, wanting a bit of peace and quiet, a chance to talk about and reflect on the experience of the mission, and he’s confronted with this crowd of people. They’re clearly desperate to see him and to hear him. Yes, there’s a good deal of plain curiosity about it all: Jesus is a man with a growing reputation, who has healed and exorcised and stirred things up in the synagogues. Many of them just want to catch a glimpse of him. But there are also those who are in great need of what he has to offer, who are longing for some meaning in their lives and believe that he can provide it.

And Jesus senses this. The debriefing session with the apostles can wait a bit, because Jesus sees people who are “*like sheep without a shepherd*”. Now, again, this is a phrase that would have struck a chord with many of his listeners and with Mark’s first readers. It crops up several times in the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament. For example, Moses is warned of the possibility that without proper structures for their life together, the people of God would end up “*like sheep without a shepherd*”. The people are described in the same way in *1 Kings 22:17*, because their king, Ahab, is no good and is failing to lead them in the ways of God. In *Ezekiel 34:5* there is a dire warning that ineffective religious leaders are going to leave the people “*like sheep without a shepherd*”. In Matthew’s story of Jesus’ life, he adds that Jesus saw the people as “*harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd*”.

These are people who have lost their way on the path of life. Their national and local, political and religious leaders have let them down. They don't know which way to turn. Their lives are devoid of meaning and purpose. When they try to do things, they fail because they have lost the eternal perspective which comes with the Kingdom of God. They are like a field full of sheep who have no idea what's going on and just wander about aimlessly, seeking nothing but their own immediate survival. And into this great flock of sheep comes the figure of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, the Messiah. Throughout the Old Testament the Messiah is spoken of in terms that draw on the image of the shepherd, and God himself is frequently referred to as the Shepherd, most memorably, of course, in *Psalms 23* – “*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.*”. And in this familiar story, Mark records the ways in which Jesus acts as a shepherd to these people and can continue to be our shepherd today.

1. **HE SHOWS COMPASSION** (v34)

Jesus steps out of the boat with his friends and is confronted by this huge crowd of people who have gone to great lengths to follow him. They are desperate to hear him, to receive from him, to listen to his words of wisdom. As we've said, there were probably all sorts of things that had motivated these people to hurry around the lake shore during the afternoon, but Jesus could discern that the root of their problem was that they had nothing worth really living for and no-one to point them in the direction where it could be found. They were a sorry sight in many ways – and not only because there would, no doubt, have been many who were poor, disabled, disadvantaged among them.

And that sight moves him to compassion. The disciples can wait. Jesus has to do something. He loves them. They matter to him. These people are the reason he came into this world. He came to bring hope to the hopeless, meaning to the despairing, healing to the sick, new possibilities to those who could think of nothing other than their immediate survival. And he still offers those things, he still holds out this offer of a new agenda, a new start, a new hope. He looks at our world today and sees the myriad influences that hold us in thrall, the multitude of voices clamouring for our attention, the plethora of religions and philosophies which purport to offer meaning and fulfilment – but none of them ever really come up with the goods. There are too many choices, too many competing claims, too many opportunities. And we wander about “*like sheep without a shepherd*”, unable or unwilling to decide between them all, unable to see where the truth lies. And Jesus still has compassion, still wants to demonstrate his love by pointing in the right direction. Which is what he does here.

2. **HE GIVES DIRECTION** (v34b)

Out there, in the fields by the lake, Jesus sits down and teaches them. They don't know the way. They have no idea where they are going. They cannot see the possibilities. Yes, they have heard of the Kingdom of God – it permeates all their scriptures as they hear them read week by week in the synagogue – but they cannot work out how to get into it. So Jesus tells them. He tells them about the purpose of life. He expounds God's plan. He offers them this new agenda.

To people who have no idea what the way is, let alone where it is leading, he presents himself as the Way. John records Jesus' as saying, “*I am the way, the truth and the life*”. For all these hopeless and helpless people there is hope and there is help. Jesus is here to announce it, to demonstrate it, to **be** it. It is his teaching that leads them in the right way – and, again, still does. Are you unsure where you're heading? Is your life feeling empty? Is there a lack of satisfaction, of fulfilment in your life? Then look at the life of Jesus. Read these gospel stories and drink in the teaching of Jesus. Look at what God has to say in the Bible and try to apply it to your situation. In many ways, the teaching of Jesus, of the whole Bible, is really a series of signposts towards the God whose heart is full of compassion for you, who longs to give you back that purpose, to bring you that fulfilment, to lead you as a shepherd into the places that are best for you, that refresh, renew, encourage and challenge you.

3. HE MAKES PROVISION (vv36ff)

But the shepherd does not simply lead the sheep, he also provides for them. And here we see Jesus do just that in this familiar story of the feeding of the crowd. It may be a metaphor for the fulfilled kingdom, but for these people it was real – it made a material difference to them there and then. It's getting late in the day and these people are starting to get hungry. After all, they probably weren't expecting to have to run around the lake, away from their villages and homes. The disciples pick up on it first of all and point out to Jesus that they ought to have a bit of a meal break. These people could be sent off to get some food from the nearest villages.

Now this was a crowd of at least five thousand – Mark tells us that there were five thousand males, and there would have been some women and children too. From contemporary sources and more recent research we know that the population of the two nearest towns, Capernaum and Bethsaida, was only two to three thousand, so not only was this a big crowd, but they would have swamped the local villages if they'd tried to get food all at once, especially late on in the day. So the disciples' agenda – either to send them off to get food or to try and buy it themselves – is a complete non-starter.

Imagine if we'd somehow managed to get Jesus to come and do some teaching on Bower Day in Beacon Park. At about six o'clock, just as all the burger bars begin to run out of stuff, the elders here start to think that it might be time to have a break, so they suggest that Jesus sends them off to get some food. Jesus says, "Why don't you organise that for them?" There's several thousand people on the grass in front of you, a few burger vans with not much left selling their food at Bank Holiday prices: do you think it would work? Nor did the disciples.

So Jesus says, "Well, we've got a few rolls, haven't we? What is there?" And there, in the lunch box of the only one who bothered to bring anything there's five baps and a tin of tuna. It's not going to work, is it? But, having established that the obvious options are just not going to work, Jesus puts into operation his agenda – use what you have. Mark puts the emphasis firmly on the "you" here.

Somehow the people get to sit in groups – literally, "*drinking party by drinking party*" (v39) and "*flower bed by flower bed*" (v40) – of hundreds and fifties (presumably that's how Mark could be sure of the number there). Jesus takes what the disciples have scraped together and says grace. Just imagine it's Beacon Park on Bower Day again – how would you respond to Jesus taking a handful of food that was too small for the people at the back even to see, and thanking God that it was going to feed everyone? It seems nuts, doesn't it? As it must also have seemed to these people.

But as the disciples fan out into the crowd with what little they have, it just keeps going on and on. There's plenty for everyone. It's a miracle! Now there have been all kinds of attempts to rationalise this away – people only had a crumb or two, it just encouraged everyone to share what they'd brought but not mentioned, and so on. But I think there's little doubt in anyone's mind that this really did happen. It's a sign of the Kingdom and a picture of God's abundant grace. There's even twelve little baskets of the stuff left over at the end. God doesn't scrimp when he's giving gifts to his people.

Over at Cannock URC, as some of you may know, we had to have quite a bit of work done on the building. It wasn't development: it was survival! It's not a large congregation, but they prayed and they gave and they applied for grants and so on, and the money eventually came in. The work was done and there was actually a surplus. As the work was completed, it was discovered that there was a colony of pigeons nesting in the roof space which was causing all kinds of problems. Specialists had to be called in and the pigeons were disposed of. It cost about £748 – more or less exactly what the surplus was. God provided and used what little the people had to give – together with their faith and prayer – to ensure that all the needs were met. It was a small miracle.

Our development here is much bigger, but we are a much bigger congregation and, I am pretty sure, much richer. We can pray to God to help us raise the money, but he will probably say, “You get on and use what you’ve got.” And as each of us prayerfully gives, the money will be there – in abundance. God is a God who provides, who provides abundantly. But we need to use what we have too. (But that’s a bit of an aside.)

Back to Jesus and this crowd. Here he is with these thousands of people, people who are anxious, desperate, aimless, directionless – just like most people are today and have been throughout history. Into their situation and ours comes Jesus as a shepherd. His heart is full of compassion as he sees their need and he determines to meet that need by giving direction to them and making provision for them – not just the basic provision, but abundant provision. He wants to reach out and offer you some direction this morning. He wants to provide for your deepest need, to allow his grace to overflow in your life. His basic challenge is still the same as it was when he first began his ministry – “*Give up your own agenda and trust me for mine.*” It’s worth it, you know.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why did Jesus feel such compassion for the crowds?
2. Would you say people today are “*like sheep without a shepherd*”? Why/why not?
3. Who should be giving a lead to people today?
4. Do miracles such as this occur today? Why/why not?
5. What are the practical implications of this story for a) the Church, b) Wade Street Church, c) you?
6. What is the main thing you have learned from this story?