

Reflecting on our community

A sermon preached by the Rev Dr David Easton on Sunday 18 October 2015
The readings were 1 Kings 17:8–16 and Mark 6:30–44

I was sorry I wasn't able to be on the Rosyth walkabout, but it's a reminder that we live in communities. So I want just to reflect very briefly on what the Gospel reading that was chosen for today says to us about community.

Jesus himself lived, it seems to me, in an ever-changing community – the community of his disciples, but also the different crowds that he met as he moved around. The Gospel reading this morning was about one particular crowd – the ones who were hungry – the 5,000 who were fed. And if you look at this story, it wasn't that Jesus invited these people to come and listen to him – there weren't posters scattered about the town saying "Jesus is here: come and hear him" – they kind of discovered him, they came uninvited. I get the impression that he was tired – that he wanted a quiet space to be on his own – and yet the people caught up with him, as so often was the case.

Ever-changing communities

I think the first point I want to make is that our communities, the communities of which we are a part (and we are part of a community – I think sadly that sometimes, as the church, we find it easier to be *apart from* the community than to be *a part of* the community) in many senses are similarly *not* of our own choosing, and they *are* ever-changing.

The community of Rosyth is very different from when the Methodist church was established here 100 years ago next year; from when this building was put up; from when your own congregations were established. Times change and move on, and these changes as it were sometimes catch us up. They present themselves to us, and so there is that sense in which the

community comes to us. We do not choose that, even if you in a sense have chosen to come and live in Rosyth. Nevertheless, its changing nature means it is always bringing new things, new opportunities, new challenges, to you.

Responding to the community

Secondly, what was the response of Jesus as these uninvited people came to him? Well, tired as he was, it says that he felt sorry for them – *compassion*; some translations say 'pity'. Pity today is perhaps a bit of a patronising word – "I pity you," but I mean that he *felt* something for them. He didn't just say "Oh, more people" or "Was it a good turn-out today?" or "That was a pretty good gig – 5,000". No, he looked at them and he felt pity. He felt sorry for them ... and he spoke to them ... and of course they were hungry.

What is *our* response to the community that comes to us, the communities of which we are a part? We need as churches to be looking out into our communities to be concerned, and we see of course today that churches are involved in foodbanks, street pastors, all sorts of initiatives to help people, refugees. But is very easy for all to sort of slip into organisational mode. How can we best do this? who is on the rota? You know all the rest of it. But at the heart of Jesus' response was that he felt *compassion*. Do we feel for the people in communities? Do we as God's people have a compassion for others? or is our expression of our Christian faith a mere almost mechanical sort of thing? For Jesus it came from his heart, he felt sorrow, he felt pity, compassion for them, and as we think about how we interact with our communities, our families, our places of work, whatever it may be, we need to have that heart of the love of Christ within us.

Meeting the need

And then thirdly, he met them where they were, at their point of need, their hunger. As the story went, they were hungry. Imagine all those 5,000 stomachs rumbling in unison! He met them where they were, and we need to meet people where they *are*, not where we think they *should be*. So often our first response is “Oh, come to church: our services are on Sunday at 9.00am or 11.00am, or whatever it might be. Do come along, you’ll be very welcome”. But if you look at the pattern of Jesus, he went to where people were: he went to the hungry; he went to the leper; he went to the beggar. That was where he was, and as churches I think we need not only to be a church with an open door to welcome people in, we need to be a church with an open door so that we can go out and be part of the community of which we are a part. Jesus went to where they were.

Being a receiving church

I think one of the most intriguing things about this story and several others about Jesus (the story of the woman at the well, for example) is that it wasn’t all a one-way street. Jesus fed them because someone gave bread and fish. Now in Mark’s account, and in Matthew and Luke’s accounts, it’s not quite clear where this food came from. The impression seems to be given that it was something the disciples had. But if you read John’s account it was a boy who gave the barley bread and fish, and Jesus was able to do the miracle. But, whichever was the case, Jesus didn’t provide it himself. Just as with the woman at the well, he asked for a cup of water. He didn’t say to her “I can give you a cup of water”, he asked for what she could give him. In John’s account of this story of the 5,000, it powerfully says he took the fish and the barley bread from a boy.

Now barley bread is something we might see in a supermarket today and say: “That’s a bit of a change – I’ll try that – slightly exotic”. It wasn’t slightly exotic for that boy, because barley bread in the time of Christ was the bread that poor people ate. The wealthy ate wheat bread. So that word ‘barley’ tells you that this boy was poor, and the fish would have been dried fish. The gift he had to offer didn’t come from his wealth, his high status; it came from his poverty and where he was in society. And Jesus didn’t turn away from that and say “Sorry that’s not good enough! I am the Son of God: I can only do miracles with food that is bought in Waitrose” (and you’ve scraped along in the Co-op or Lidl or Aldi, or wherever). No, he took what was offered, and then did the miracle.

So, as well as thinking about what we can give to others in our community, we need to be a *receiving* church. (It was interesting that our people were grateful for what they had learned in the walkabout) I am not speaking here about receiving money when we want a new roof on our church; I am talking about something far more profound, in accepting what others can give. If it’s only a cup of cold water, or a piece of barley bread, we are saying that what that person has to offer is worthy to be received. And more, that the person is worthy and that we are gracious enough to receive it.

Do we as a church have enough of the grace of Christ among us that we feel love and compassion for our communities? Do we have enough of the grace and love of Christ about us that we are willing and ready to receive what the communities of which we are a part of have to give? Jesus had that grace, and a miracle happened. What miracles of grace are we willing to allow Christ to work through us today?