



# Sunday Reflection

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew  
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 21 July 2024

## Pentecost 9

### The Curate will preach at St John's

Today we recall how the crowds flocked to Jesus and how he taught and healed them. What is our experience as part of the gathered community of the Christian church?

*As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.*

(Mark 6.34)

### A story to set the scene

Some England fans went to extraordinary lengths to watch the final of the Euros in Berlin. There were many hurdles to overcome. Tickets soon sold out on UEFA's website. Following England's win in the semi-finals, the cost of flights soared. Journalists interviewed supporters who had spent tens of thousands of pounds to be there. One even anticipated victory by having England's win tattooed on his body before the match had been played.

Interestingly, after the result, some fans told reporters that it had all been worth it to be there. The experience was everything -the anticipation, the tension even the shared agony at the end.

There is no doubt that the crowd experience is a phenomenon that people seek and feel buoyed up by. There was the unprecedented size of concerts on the Taylor Swift tour. And the semi-religious fervour of the Republican Convention in Milwaukee this Thursday when Donald Trump accepted the Presidential nomination.

What longing does this kind of experience satisfy? What is it people are seeking and what do they receive from being part of a mass gathering of adulation and group solidarity?

## **Today's Gospel Teaching**

Today the Lectionary offers us a sideways view. The big set pieces – the feeding of the five thousand, the stilling of the storm – which come in the middle of the verses we are set – are missed out. It reminds me of that Tom Stoppard play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* where *Hamlet* is retold from the perspective of two of the minor characters and in every scene, Hamlet has always just existed, as it were, stage left.

Actually, it is not a good analogy, because Jesus is front and centre of all that happens in these Gospel passages. It is Jesus that the crowds of people are desperate to find, hurrying on foot to where he is going so that they can be there when he arrives. And it is to be near Jesus that they rush from across the whole Region to bring those who are sick for healing.

There is a raw hunger there. We heard last week in the story of Herod's beheading of John the Baptist, something of the terrible regime under which they were living. And Jesus matches their emotional and spiritual longing in his response. He had 'compassion' on them, we're told. It's a very strong word in Greek, 'splanchnizomai'. It means 'moved in your innards, your bowels'. It's the same word used to describe the reaction of the Good Samaritan to the man who had been attacked and robbed on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Jesus felt the pain of the people who flocked to him, and he felt their need for restoration in his gut. In the first of our two stories he responds by giving them teaching, telling them the Kingdom of God has come near,

teaching them what they need to do to gain eternal life, - to turn to God and ask for forgiveness.

But the second story is important for completing the picture of what it was that Jesus gave the crowds. The hope he offered was not mere words or promises. It was real and it was physical. He healed the many who were brought to him and touched him. And the word for healing and salvation is inter-changeable. The life and hope that Jesus brought was wholeness, a healing of body and soul.

### **Taking it into our own lives**

Those who walked miles to reach Jesus didn't come for a selfie! Nor does their experience seem to have been one of communal fervour, like in the 1950s in Glasgow when Billy Graham preached to thousands at Hampden as part of the All Scotland Crusade. Mark gives no sense of that, though of course we don't know what it was like. Mark's focus is on the encounter people had with Jesus, that experience of inner and outer transformation.

We may wish that we could have been in the crowd who rushed towards Jesus. But our reading from Ephesians emphasises how we now share in the meaning of that experience.

*But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (v.13) .*

As we turn to Christ, in our confession, at the Eucharist and in our lives, we are brought near to God through Christ's sacrifice, able to be healed in body and soul.

At this point of course those who first came to Jesus were just individuals in the crowd, although church historians speak of the growth in believers after the resurrection as 'the Jesus movement'. Whereas, we are part of a gathered community, centred on Christ.

*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone (vv.19-20).*

It has been said<sup>1</sup> that the church building 'is not, per se, the place where God dwells. Rather, it is a meeting house where the community engages with God and one another. Our experience is social, physical and spiritual. We are here because Jesus has touched us, whether we rushed towards him or crawled slowly in that direction for many years. And what we receive is grace. We haven't needed to empty our bank accounts to have the experience of being part of the family of Christ. Rather, it is through free grace that we are able, as we gather together, to feel the power of his peace-giving spirit and restorative love that embraces all humanity.

*As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things. (Mark 6.34)*

## **& the Rector St Margaret's:-**

We are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. So let us join our hearts and voices in worship.

*"He had compassion for them." Mark 6:34*

### **An illustration to set the scene**

The American television series ***The West Wing*** tells the story of a Democratic American president, Josiah Bartlett, and his staff, as they serve two terms in office.

In one episode the president, who is as usual facing political challenges, goes to visit Oklahoma where a tornado has caused serious damage and loss of life.

He talks to the affected people, and prays with them.

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<sup>1</sup> By Richard S. Vosko

He helps with the washing up in the kitchen of the temporary accommodation.

To the dismay of his staff, he decides to stay the night.

He is doing good work, he says.

He is needed.

It takes a concerted effort from his advisors to persuade him to go back to Washington and resume running the country.

He cares about the people; he has compassion for them.

For a moment he forgets that it is his job to show compassion by caring for the whole nation.

He must go back to the challenges and traumas that are waiting for him in the White House; he must resume his job of making a better country for all its people.

### **Today's Gospel teaching**

Mark's Gospel narrative always moves at a fairly brisk pace; note how often Mark's sentences begin, "***And immediately***".

Today's reading, however, has even more rushing about in it than usual.

The impression is heightened by the fact that our reading leaves out two whole stories between the two incidents of crowds pursuing Jesus and his disciples, but it means we get a feel for the urgency of Jesus' mission.

The end of Jesus' ministry was foreseeable at its beginning.

The content of his teaching, his healing activity, his befriending of the unsuitable people: everything about his ministry meant that a clash with the authorities was inevitable.

He would not be able to get away with it for long.

There was a lot to fit in before his destiny caught up with him, and Mark's is the Gospel that most clearly expresses the hurry.

It is the shortest of the Gospels, and the most breathless.

In today's reading, Jesus and his disciples do not even have their well-deserved time off.

There are more needy people to minister to, more demands to be met.

In the verses that are omitted from our reading, Jesus feeds the five thousand and stills a storm on the lake.

There is no let-up.

But there is more to this than the need for Jesus to fit in everything he needs to achieve in the space of a very short time.

He responds to the requests of the crowds because, as Mark tells us, "***he had compassion for them***".

They were like sheep, running around in circles, bleating for help, needing the compassionate shepherd.

But unlike President Bartlett, Jesus was able to keep his eyes on the bigger picture as well as the immediate need.

It was the whole world that needed healing, not just the needy residents of Judaea.

All humanity needed the work of the shepherd, and that meant staying resolutely on the road to Jerusalem and the end towards which Mark's story is rushing.

## **How can we apply the teaching to our own lives?**

Jesus cared about the people he met.

He had compassion for them.

He was prepared to do whatever it took to improve their lives, to feed them and heal them and give them hope.

But that was not the whole of his mission.

The fate of the whole world depended on the extent of his compassion.

Jesus showed us that at the centre of our universe, there is compassion.

Our ultimate ruler is not a demanding tyrant but a loving heart.

Whoever we are, whatever we do, God cares about us.

When we make a mess of our lives, when we fail to care for our planet, when we hurt other people, God has compassion.

Jesus showed us in his own life and death the lengths to which God is prepared to go to be our shepherd, to look after us and to lead us to a place of peace and rest.

*"He had compassion for them." Mark 6:34*

[www.SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk](http://www.SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk)