

2nd August 2020, St Brandon's Revd Anna Brooker

Matthew 14:13-23

'They need not go away.'

We were fortunate recently to be able to meet up again with my brother and sister and their spouses. We decided, all being gardeners, to meet at Harlow Carr, the RHS centre near Thirsk.

We took our own picnics and sat in socially distanced pairs on the grass- very strange when we're used to family gatherings where everyone brings food and shares it.

Yes, it was strange, not to share, to treat loved ones as strangers. I expect we are all discovering that.

But, it was still very special to see each other again.

And the sun shone – shorts and tee shirts in Yorkshire can't be bad!

Today's gospel takes us to another picnic, one where I doubt there was any social distancing going on, given the numbers...

And some strange things happened here, too.

After a very trying afternoon managing the crowds surrounding Jesus, his disciples suggest that he sends everyone away now, before it gets dark, so they can buy some food on the way home. Jesus, and they, could then get some peace. Entirely understandable.

But this is Jesus, and his reply is not what they expect.

To their ears, and ours, it's pretty strange!

He says two things.

They need not go away.

You give them something to eat.

I've read this story many times, but I only really remember the second statement,

You give them something to eat.

And we know how that works out, don't we?

Thanks to John's version of the story, we know there was a boy, who spoke to Andrew and offered to share his tea. We know that, out of all that crowd, it was a child who offered his food. All the adults were far too sensible- they knew that their few small picnics would never go round. They had good excuses for not helping.. as adults often do. But the boy just did it, 'Here's my tea!' He gave what he had. It was as if he had Jesus's instruction himself:

' You give them something to eat'.

And we know, don't we, that we can learn so much from children - their enthusiasm, spontaneity, readiness to share where adults might hold back. We know also that, when we offer what we have, God

multiplies it, as shown so clearly in this wonderful miracle, which I never tire of hearing. We must never think we can't do anything, can't make a difference, because God takes the little we can do or give and makes it bigger!

This is the kingdom of heaven begin created before their eyes- remember the mustard seed which we heard about last week?

You plant a tiny seed, or offer a small picnic, and just see what God does. We've planted a few mustard seeds this week through Brancepeth Alive, a few young people getting together (safely) for drama, art, craft or to watch a film and have fun- who knows what branches will grow and which birds will settle in it? It's exciting to see.

So far, so very good.

But today, I want us to think about the *first* thing Jesus says in response to the disciples:

They need not go away.

I wonder what those weary men were thinking?

They'd expected some space and time with Jesus today, in which to process the awful news of John the Baptist's death (which is told in the first 12 vv of Chapter 14, which we didn't read).

Instead, they've been followed and Jesus has been besieged by people asking for healing and help, all afternoon.

They think: it is time *they* went home.

This was meant to be *our* time with Jesus, not *theirs*.

They are a real nuisance, coming from the towns, disturbing our peace, from all kinds of backgrounds, all kinds of needs. The demands will never end unless *they* are sent home.

They think: We're not going to do that- let's ask Jesus!

And Jesus says: **They need not go away.**

Jesus turns the disciples' assumptions on their head.

Jesus says, 'This isn't a *them and us* situation:

it's not their fault that everyone is hungry- they've walked miles seeking help and hope for their loved ones:

they didn't set out to annoy anyone.

Jesus sees an opportunity, not a problem..

He hears the disciples' stress and annoyance and transforms it through compassion and generosity.

I so long to hear Jesus clearly in situations like that.

When I wish the phone hadn't rung just as I'm about to sit down, when the plans I've made are thrown and I feel I'm not in control of my time, my day, my needs and plans..

At times I confess, I want to shut people out, blame them, exclude them, both in my everyday life and in my response to wider situations and issues.

But I long to react with compassion rather than fear,
with generosity rather than selfishness

They need not go away, says Jesus.

Why not?

Because *they* are included and loved as God's children. Because Jesus' compassion has no limits.

No *them and us* in the Kingdom of Heaven- we are all children of the same heavenly father.

They need not go away.

When we really hear this statement, before our minds racing to the food, then the miracle which results is even more amazing.

Jesus doesn't tell the disciples off for their assumptions.

He challenges them, yes, but then he shows them a different way.

What had felt impossible, becomes possible.

Because this story is in every gospel, we know all the details- remembered vividly, retold and recorded.

- Andrew was already on it- resourceful, practical Andrew, who'd spotted the boy and had a quiet word
- everyone had their part to play; they worked together, passing the food around, astonished as the bread and fish just kept on coming...
- Jesus showed them how to do it-
prayer, organisation, teamwork, more prayer

I asked Robert to read an extra two verses today which aren't in the set reading. Here's why. When that amazing picnic was over and no one could eat another mouthful, when they'd collected the leftovers so nothing was wasted, then perhaps it was like this.

Jesus looked at them all, his team, smiled and said 'Time to go! Now!'

So the disciples rushed straight to the boat and out across the lake. As they looked back, they saw a never ending stream of children, women and men, making their way home along the shore, walking and talking, paddling and playing, laughing and waving.

No longer hungry and no longer strangers,

but friends with whom they had shared

food, life and love- all given by Jesus.

Up on the hillside, he waved back at the crowds, and across to their boat, then turned and walked into the hills, up and up until he was out of sight.

They all knew he was going to pray, just him and his Father, as he had taught them to do too.

And he had taught them something else today:

they need not go away –you have all you need, together, to meet their needs.

Have we learned this yet?

Let's pray:

Our Father in heaven,

when we want people to go away, give us your love.

When we feel too tired to respond, give us your strength.

When we stop seeing other's needs and worry about our own, forgive us and show us what we can offer.

In the name of Jesus, who showed us how to do this. Amen