

I feel like every week at the moment I could stand up and say 'a lots happened this week!' And it would be true. This past week for me seems to have been a weird mix of beginnings and endings, and at some points it felt like I wasn't quite sure who I was, or where I was. This was partly due to the fact that it was my parents last 3 days in London so we were trying to fit in a lot, and spend as much time together; and at the same time there were end of school leavers services, a wedding to prepare for yesterday and planning for scaffolding that arrives early this coming week. There was a point on Wednesday where I thought I understood what Bilbo Baggins meant in the Lord of the Rings, when he says 'I feel like too little butter spread over too much bread.' It isn't a bad feeling, just a stretched feeling, a feeling like you weren't quite sure what the priority was at any given moment.

Having said that, I have had a wonderful week, full of emotional highs and lows, and some truly beautiful moments. And there was a moment yesterday at the wedding, when Ogechi walked down this aisle holding her father's hand – his walking stick in the other, where you could feel the love between father and daughter, but also their shared love for God. They walked very slowly and purposefully. It was such a busy wedding with people continually arriving, and the gentle noise of babies waking, that this moment of total focus towards marriage seemed poignant. Then after the vows were shared, I wrapped my stole around their hands, and as I said 'what God has joined', the whole congregation joined in.

After everyone had left the wedding yesterday I went over to St Mary's on Abbey Road for the installation of the new Vicar, at the end of the service we then processed up Priory Road and along West End Lane, all in our full regalia, to the sister church of St James, as that parish has two churches. Here in the midst of busy London again was a parade of people following and visible – there was much pointing at the parade as we walked past the bars on Broadhurst Gardens.

Both these events yesterday were both very public and also in many ways private – for each person there was a story of why they were there – and yet there was also a public element of faith too.

So much of life just is, we may well be in public, but so much of our purpose, our knowing is private – but also we can be part of a crowd, pushed and pulled, and yet holding onto that stretched feeling, but being held by God.

Today we read the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark. A lot happens in this sixth chapter. Jesus is rejected in his hometown. He sends the twelve on mission. John the Baptist is killed. Jesus feeds the five thousand and walks on water. These are all major events in Mark's narrative, so much so that the passages appointed for today pale in comparison. Sure, Jesus heals many people in the end, but otherwise there is nothing dramatic in what happens.

But in fact, the passages that make up the Gospel reading for today serve in important ways to advance Mark's central concern: the inauguration of the kingdom of God in Jesus. These verses emphasize Jesus' identity as the true, divine shepherd, who will guide his sheep into

the kingdom; and the nature of that kingdom, through healings that disrupt the economy of this world.<sup>1</sup>

The point of the passages today is that they help us to get not only a picture of the day to day of Jesus life and Ministry – but they also help us to understand what this might also mean for our own lives and identity. Mark is working to ensure that his readers understand that Jesus has a vision for a new Kingdom, one which is different to their experience of life as they know it. One which is not bound up in oppression or slavery, one that does not only give justice to the wealthy – and a kingdom where God is the shepherd – even in grief God will nurture them. Now this is not an easy image for us, as it is not something necessarily familiar to us – but it was to the crowds following Jesus and they knew what it meant for a shepherd to feed and protect their sheep. This was a very powerful image of the kingdom of God.

During the week I was talking to my brother who is a sheep and cattle farmer in Australia – they are in the middle of the worst drought in more that 30 years. They have had no decent rain in nearly two years and they are needing to hand feed – that means provide food for all their sheep and cattle – as there is not grass left at all.

My brother is also a representative on the sheep growers board, and last week the government in NSW decided to amend a policy relating to how wild dogs are managed in bushland areas. As a result, my brother was asked to come to a meeting with the local politicians to discuss the new policy. While he was there they asked him what other help they needed with the drought. My brother responded – if you want to help us, stop changing policies and calling us to meetings while the drought continues – I have sheep to feed who are dying! A shepherd is someone who feeds the sheep, who has that as their sole focus when all is dying around them. A shepherd is one who is not afraid to speak out against distractions that stop the sheep being protected. A shepherd is one that will sell all they have, or borrow all they can so that the sheep won't go hungry. The crowds around Jesus would have understood this too – that a shepherd was an image of a God who really cared about them and their daily needs.

The passage we heard today comes immediately after the beheading of John the Baptist, it is a painful time in Jesus ministry – and for those who believed and understood that John was the forerunner to Jesus. The disciples were grieving, as would have Jesus been. And yet despite the fact that they tried to draw away the crowds keep coming in. So as the crowds come Jesus, he is moved in compassion for these lost sheep, and he "began to teach them many things" (Mark 6:34). The food for which the people hunger is the very word of God, and in so feeding them Jesus shows himself to be a shepherd "after [God's] own heart," feeding God's people "with knowledge and understanding" (Jeremiah 3:15). What is more, he shows himself to be the divine shepherd, the very Son of God in whom the kingdom has come<sup>2</sup>.

There is a great deal of imagery in this few short verses which try to communicate a great deal to the audience. Jesus grief at John's death and the need for prayer; then the

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2540](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2540)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2540](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2540)

compassion he shows, but also the recognition that Jesus sheep are not hungry for grain but for understand of who God is. I suspect that this is true for us too. Our hunger is so often for love and knowledge – of who God is and how we relate to God in the contexts we find ourselves in.

But Jesus does more than feed and teach them, Jesus goes on also to heal them. By healing the sick, the weakest and most vulnerable members of a community, in this space, Jesus is subverting the world in which they lived – he was changing people's context and experience so that the Kingdom of God might be clearly at hand.

So what does this mean for us, who are pulled and pushed, stretched within the different contexts of our week? What do we hunger for? What healing to we seek? Are we open to allow God –to subvert our context and understanding? I suspect for many of us, particularly if you are like me, and like to have some sense of control over what is happening in your life, it is actually hard to let go and let God, so to speak. It may even be hard for us to admit that we are hungry or in need of help. Jesus understood this, which is why he trying to get the disciples to draw away from the crowds, to take time to deal with all that had happened. But he too was pulled back in by his compassion – though he still needed in time to take time out to pray.

Each week we encounter many experiences, some which are memorial – attendance at a wedding, waving to parents at an airport, the last day of school – some which are more routine which we may not notice. Some weeks we may feel that too much is asked or expected, and we may feel stretched beyond what feels possible. But the stories of Jesus we hear today remind us that we are nurtured, fed and cared for by a God who is bigger than our feelings, who walks with us in the pushing crowds and holds us far beyond our expectations. In our prayer and in our living we are touched by God, and we are invited to allow this to inspire to continue to live out justice in the world.

Yesterday at the induction the priest prayed the pray of St Bridgit, his patron

I'd like to give a lake of beer to God.  
I'd love the Heavenly  
Host to be tippling there  
For all eternity.

I'd love the men of Heaven to live with me,  
To dance and sing.  
If they wanted, I'd put at their disposal  
Vats of suffering.

White cups of love I'd give them,  
With a heart and a half;  
Sweet pitchers of mercy I'd offer  
To every man.

I'd make Heaven a cheerful spot,  
Because the happy heart is true.  
I'd make the men contented for their own sake  
I'd like Jesus to love me too.

I'd like the people of heaven to gather  
From all the parishes around,  
I'd give a special welcome to the women,  
The three Marys of great renown.

I'd sit with the men, the women of God  
There by the lake of beer  
We'd be drinking good health forever  
And every drop would be a prayer. <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Read more at <http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/christianity/2000/03/a-lake-of-beer-for-god.aspx#ytYlkwjwlvKlx1g4.99>