

For the next few weeks the lectionary takes a break from Mark's Gospel and we return to the Gospel of John. "Return" because of the amount of time we spent in John's narrative in Lent and Easter. But now rather than jumping to and fro through John's story of Jesus, we'll immerse ourselves for five weeks in just one chapter. A chapter rife with significance in John's Gospel and in our own understanding of the sacraments.

Last week, we heard the verses around today's story, but as told by Mark. As we begin the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of John, unlike Mark's Gospel these events take place not after the beheading of John the Baptist, but rather as part of a series of teachings which help the reader to understand more fully who Jesus is, and these verses relate for us much of how the church has developed its understanding of faith and of sacraments.

But let's begin by considering the crowd who are following Jesus. Hear is a crowd who are incredibly loyal and faithful to Christ. They are people who have witnessed Jesus' miracle and saw in him their salvation from political tyranny and wanted from him more of his miraculous power, healing, and nourishment. They weren't a rabble, or foolish -they were faithful people, for when they saw the mighty deeds of Jesus they perceived him to be from God, and "from God" – especially in this chapter, meant to them a mighty prophet like Moses, who would deliver them from Rome and restore Israel to glory just as Moses had delivered the Israelites from Egypt. And just when they think they have this promised prophet – it is just at this point that Jesus withdraws. For he would not be king on their terms...or on anyone else's. Christ's word to these faithful people was harsh; for it was the word, "No." No to all their ambitions and delusions of power and control.<sup>1</sup>

John is a very clever story teller and it is no accident that his version of the feeding of the 5000 and the surrounding narrative have strong similarities to the stories his audience would have known about Moses. John also conveys Jesus' unique standing as a prophet by associating him with Moses as well as Elijah. Many of the details of these verses suggest a parallel to the Exodus story. Jesus goes up a mountain (John 6:3). *The events are set at the time of Passover (John 6:4), the celebration of God's triumph in the Exodus story. The order of events: Passover meal, sea crossing, manna discourse, also might cause readers to perceive an allusion to the Exodus. By climbing the mountain and providing the meal, John situations Jesus as Moses, who facilitated the provision of food for Israel. Like Moses, Jesus does signs that lead the people to trust in him (John 2:12; 4:46-54; see also Exodus 4:1-17). The people respond to Jesus positively, yet Jesus rejects their desire to make him king<sup>2</sup>.*

AS we have talked about over the past months Jesus is trying to help the people understand that he is not replacing one dysfunctional leadership with his own

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/07/pentecost-9-b-visible-words/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3720](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3720)

version of the same system – rather God has come to change the system – to offer a new kind of leadership and governance all together!

When I was a new young teacher I remember being sent on an assignment to a difficult inner city school in Sydney. I had been there on one occasion before, when I had lost control of a group of 8 year olds who decided that throwing all the maths equipment around the classroom was more fun than doing maths.

They had been looking for someone to cover year six for 6 weeks, and I was the only one who had offered to return to the school so I got the job. Until that point I had either taught reception or adults, 11 year olds hitting puberty were not really in my experience at all! I had met with their current teacher who explained that provided I set clear boundaries and stuck to their routine – all would be well! He gave me lessons and a plan for the first two days. For the first two weeks I stuck to that plan, I did exactly as he had done, I used his pattern, his material and developed it. Even though I was a new teacher – I replicated for the most part the children’s current experience of a teacher, until one day something happened, and the pattern changed – and I was panic stricken – suddenly I had to think of my own plan, and pattern – suddenly I had to be the teacher I was, rather than a mimic of the one who had gone before me.

It is the danger of something that we think works, or of a person or system we like – it is often even the danger of a system we are trying to change or overthrow – we actually take on the pattern of what we are replacing. Jesus had not come to be a King or even a government – yes he had come to offer freedom and justice – but not by overthrowing the political system, but rather by changing the system that we think we need.

It is often so hard for us to understand this – or even to continue to offer an alternate way. Part of this is because in essence the Kingdom of God – the community that Jesus is attempting to create is about grace – and grace is something which is hard to define, and even harder to live out.

As a colleague reminded me on Friday however, we live in a post resurrection era, that means we are not the crowds who surround by Jesus who are struggling to understand what this might mean. Rather we are a people who have the luxury of 2000 years of Christian history, of theological thought and discussion on which that grace – what that vision is actually about.

It is why this reading from John is paired with Exodus and Ephesians. The Exodus reading gives us a sense of how the new followers of Jesus interpreted their experience using this knowledge of Moses and the Exodus. And Ephesians helps us to step aside from our struggle with understanding and knowledge – to explore that what in the end is central to this vision is grace and prayer.

The first three chapters of Ephesians are an expansive statement about God's overflowing and saving grace. That is brought to a fitting conclusion with the prayer and doxology which is the text which we hear today. The author prays that the church be filled by the God who is able to do more than we can imagine. The author's vision of the church's mission is breathtaking: "*that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places*" (3:10). In order to live out that mission, the church needs God's own strength, power, and presence; that is, the church needs this prayer, and the one who is the object of its closing doxology.<sup>3</sup>

These verses capture a sense of what Jesus is trying to communicate when he says 'No'. No I will not be like the Pharaoh's or the leaders you have known before – but I will help you all to have strength and power to change what you know – but to do this we must experience love. The most likely understanding is that the author is talking about Christ's love. It is not that Christ's love can be measured and its limits determined; rather, the author prays that the church will come to know the infinite reach of this love in all directions. It is such love that we "comprehend with all the saints." This is what worship, service, fellowship, and the whole life of the church is about<sup>4</sup>. It is a powerful vision!

The challenge for us as a community, is the same as those first followers of Christ who wanted to install him as their new King – we have to have to courage to see that the source of change is within us – in the way we love, and in the way that we pray together. We need to come and worship together regularly, and come as ourselves, not as others or replicating a shadow of those who have gone before us.

I had to admit to being a little upset this morning as I listen to the Sunday program to hear again that we have repeated mistakes that we have made before as the church of England yet again. It isn't good enough, we need to leave the shadows of our past behaviours and do better!

The writer of the Ephesians encourages us to sing to the Glory of God, and in this to find the answer we are looking for, to consistently search and commit to the breadth, depth and expanse of God's love, and within this to have the courage to love ourselves and each other as well.

It is quite a vision. And we are invited to let go of the shadows and move forward to love as we are called to love. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2546](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2546)

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