

I have a confession to make. As I get older I am learning that I am not as patient as I would like to be, or even have believed myself to be. Two weeks ago, in an attempt to make everything 'perfect' for a special service we were having I was rushing, and not asking for help. In this act I managed to go over on my foot and pull either a muscle or ligament- not sure which - but it hurt!

I thought *this* had helped me learn that:

1. I need to be more realistic about what I can achieve
2. I need to ask for help when I can.

For the last two weeks I thought I was practicing these two things. On Thursday, towards the end of quite another full week I had been asked if I could go and visit someone. I had said yes, even though I knew it might not be good for my foot, that the person wouldn't be upset if I explained, and that I was very tired. But my foot hurt much less, and I just thought I had been resting it long enough, and I was impatient to do something normal. In that decision, I managed to re-pull my foot muscle and am now back to square one of the healing process.

I was so impatient to just get on with life, I did not recognise the danger I put myself, and another in. It is lesson I am beginning to wonder if I will ever learn. Sometimes the thing we want and need most, is the thing which is hardest to find!

Today's gospel reading, Jesus is actually trying to find space to grieve the death of his cousin John. More than grieve, he also needed space to prayer as he contemplated that John's death also moved his journey more closely towards Jerusalem. But every time Jesus tried to find a quiet space to prayer - the crowds would find him. It is one time when you might expect Jesus to be impatient - but instead Jesus only offers compassion.

I find this image of Jesus a confronting one, how often are we caught by someone who phones at a time that doesn't suit, or has an opinion we don't want to hear, and we respond by immediately sending them away. I am not advocating here that we have no boundaries, there are times when we need to set limits and say no. But like Jesus, we need to be open to what is in front of us and respond to that need.

After seeing the crowd, Jesus felt compassion for them. We often emphasize the miracle, but overlook the sympathy that literally moves Jesus. Jesus' compassion compels him to act. Jesus cures the sick people in the crowd because he cared for them. Apparently Jesus' healing had taken a great deal of time because his disciples come to him and suggest that he send the crowd away.

The disciples' request is not malicious. They simply are aware of their location (a deserted place) and the time (the day has turned into evening). Jesus says to the disciples, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat. They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish'" (Matthew 13:16). Although the disciples approach is understandable -- it's getting late and people are probably

starting to get hungry -- Jesus seems perplexed by the disciples' request to send the people away. Why would they leave when the disciples had food¹?

In many ways the heart of today's gospel reading is not the miracle of the loaves and the fish, but rather that Jesus acts over and over again out of compassion; and also out of a desire to meet physical and mental needs, as much as the spiritual. The reason they are in this place and situation is because Jesus stops to bring healing. What is it trying to teach us about how we respond with compassion to each other and the world around us?

Stories are a wonderful thing. It always amazes me that stories always have the ability to change shape – just when we think we have worked out the direction they are taking – a little like our lives I guess. I have another confession to make however, while I like to read stories, I have two or three novels which I read on a regular basis. Partly because they are well written, and partly because there is something reassuring about knowing how the story is going to end. I know that if I reach for one of these novels it often means there is a lot of change or uncertainty in my life, and I am looking for something familiar. It is a kind of safety or comfort net. I suspect each of us will have something similar, whether it is a favourite novel or movie or place or even person which we turn to because it is certain and in some way a comfort to the changing shape of what is in front of us.

The trouble is that sometimes, even stories that we know well, can confront us or challenge us – because we change and so we see them from a different perspective. This is so often the case when it comes to biblical passages of scripture – like the story of the loaves and fishes. We have heard it so often, we think we know a story when suddenly that same story hits us in an unexpected way and we have to take a step back to look at what it is we are hearing or reading.

Many of us are impatient at present, it is a natural response to uncertainty – we want things to be a bit clearer, a little more familiar. We are being asked to do things that are uncomfortable, like wearing masks in church, and we are not really sure what this means for how we understand being in this space. It is challenging. But sometimes we need to step back from our frustration, like Jesus, and allow our hearts to be filled with compassion for what is before us. To be open to seeing what might be possible with all that is pressing in on us.

Interestingly, as we continue in our reading of Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul also is attempting to help his audience know how to respond to changing contexts, and find new insights.

For the first 8 chapters of Romans, Paul is quite strong and confident and even encouraging, but then as we start chapter 9, he changes direction. The 5 verses we heard today are an introduction. In this next section, Paul is trying to help the

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3357

community to understand that God is the one who has given Israel all its great gifts, God is the one who has fulfilled the promises in Christ – giving them a growing understanding that the Kingdom and promise of God.

Paul is trying to help these new faith communities understand that the kingdom of God is bigger than their understanding. This was a dramatic change to their lives, not just too how they prayed and who they prayed with, but the way they ate – their daily practices and customs. In a sense it was like inhabiting a new country, where everything seemed unfamiliar and strange – and yet you were still living in your own home. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus truly changed who they understood themselves to be and how they lived their lives day by day.

We might resonate with this description. On one level, everything at present seems familiar – we spend a lot of time at home, in a small number of spaces and with a small number of people. When we do go out we only go to very familiar contexts. But the way things happen in all these places has changed – from the way we interact, to what we wear and touch – to how close we can be with each other. At this point in history we may find we can understand the experience of the Roman's or the disciples more. So what then can we learn from them?

Paul encourages the Romans to find strength in Christ as they learn to inhabit a familiar space in new ways. Jesus models that it is from a place of compassion that we might find a way to respond when all around us is pressing in. Note also, that Jesus also point out to the disciples that they have all they need in their midst – there is food when it is blessed and shared.

This week we enter a new phase of pandemic response, as we are confronted that things are going to be challenging for a long time, with lots of changing and challenging guidance. Our readings today offer us two tools as we move forward: firstly that we open our hearts and are compassionate, and secondly that we find strength in God as we learn to live in new ways.

This situation is much bigger than us, but it is not bigger than God. Maybe that is what we can hold onto. Amen.