

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, I managed to hurt my foot! Since that time, I have been trying to rest it. On Thursday, I was impatient to do something normal – and so when to meet someone. In that decision, I managed to re-pull my foot muscle. I was so impatient to just get on with life, I made it worse. Sometimes the thing we want and need most, is the thing which is hardest!

Today's gospel reading – as Jesus feeds over 5000 with a few loaves and fishes – 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 contemplate what this also meant for his own future. 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 turn away. I am not advocating here that we have no boundaries, there are times when we need to set limits. 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 that 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 that they are in a deserted place and day has turned into evening. 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?

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 each space. It is challenging. But sometimes we need to step back from our frustration, like Jesus, and allow our

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

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.

Paul also addresses this uncertainty in the reading set from Romans 9. The 5 verses heard today are an introduction. Paul is trying to help these new faith communities understand that the kingdom of God is bigger than their understanding. They faced 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. For this community everything seemed unfamiliar and strange – and yet they were still living in the same community with new customs. 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. What then can we learn from the experience of the Roman's or the disciples?

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.

The Pandemic is far from over, but our readings today offer tools as we move forward: firstly that we open our hearts and are compassionate rather than impatient in our response; and secondly that we find strength in God as we learn to live in new ways in familiar surroundings.

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