

For the next few weeks, the lectionary takes a break from Mark's Gospel and we return to the Gospel of John – where we spent much time during Lent and Easter. But now rather than jumping to and fro through John's story of Jesus, we'll immerse ourselves in just one chapter.

Last week, we heard the verses around today's story, but as told by Mark. As we begin the 6th 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 help us see how the church has developed its understanding of faith and of sacraments.

But let's begin by considering the crowd who are following Jesus. Here is a crowd who are incredibly loyal and faithful to Christ. They are people who have witnessed Jesus' miracles; and saw in him their chance for salvation from political tyranny. They were looking for more than just miraculous power, healing, and nourishment. They weren't a foolish rabble - 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 they saw 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 – 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 of power and control.¹

John is a very clever storyteller 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 writes so that many of the details of these verses suggest a parallel to the Exodus story. Jesus goes up a mountain (John 6:3) – Just like Moses. 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, sharing of bread, also might cause readers to think of the Exodus. The people respond to Jesus positively, yet Jesus rejects their desire to make him king².

We spend a lot of time talking about the nature of God's reign, and how God is trying to help us to see a there is a different way. But humanity has always struggled with this – we still do! Jesus is trying to help the people understand that he is not replacing one dysfunctional leadership with his own version of the same system – rather God has come to change the system – to offer a new kind of leadership and governance all together!

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

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3720

I think I may have shared this story with some of you before. But I remember very vividly as a young teacher getting a job to cover year six for 6 weeks in a challenging inner-city school. Until that point, I had either taught reception or adults, 11-year-olds were a new thing for me! I had met with their current teacher who explained that if provided I set clear boundaries and stick to their routine – all would be well! He gave me lessons and a structure 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 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 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. 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.

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 a description of God's overflowing 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.³ This is not a vision of an institution but of a movement, a people.

These verses capture a sense of what Jesus is trying to communicate when he says 'No'. No I will not be like

³ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2546

the Pharoah'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 infinite love of God which reaches 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 about⁴. 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 and act 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.

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. We are invited to let go of the shadows, to have courage to be who God created us to be; and move forward to love as we are called to love. Amen.

⁴ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2546

8th after Trinity – 25th July 2021
2 Kings 4:42-44; Ephesians 3:14-21 and John 6:1-21