

18 July 2021

Wantage

Today's gospel reading consists of two sections from St Mark's gospel, which bookend the feeding of the 5000, which we didn't hear this week. That may seem like a strange omission but I think our attention is meant to be drawn to something else – something about how Jesus conducts his mission. If we put our minds to work I think we can well imagine the scene: Jesus and his apostles are exhausted. The demands placed on them were immense – people, we are told, were coming and going, 'they had no leisure even to eat'. What does Jesus do? First he invites the apostles to 'come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile' and secondly, he had compassion on the crowd.

The temptation I think when we are this gospel to put ourselves into the role of Jesus, maybe we feel harassed and busy at work or by some family situation, perhaps we have had a hard week or are going through some kind of personal difficulty. We can add to our sense of pressure, the demands placed upon us, if we imagine that we are simply to respond like Jesus. Now at one level this is true, we do want to respond to those around us with compassion, but I think that really we need to see ourselves as other the crowd or the apostles in this story. Jesus comes to us with compassion, he invites us to rest a while, to go to a deserted place with him. In other words when we are harassed, when we are in need, Jesus invites us to deepen our relationship with him. We are like the people begging him that we might touch even the fringe of his cloak. We are the people in need of the healing touch of Jesus.

The temptation, of course, is to rely on ourselves, or to even feel that we are not in need of Christ's healing. If only we had a bit more will power, made a bit more of an effort than we could manage. This temptation is not a new one. The fourth century heretic Pelagius rejected the doctrine of Original Sin and said that mankind had the free will to achieve human perfection without divine grace. It remains a remarkably live heresy today and if we are not careful it is one that we can all too easily fall into. The implications are ultimately a rejection of a need for a Saviour. Instead of relying on ourselves we have to throw ourselves upon the mercy of Jesus, not just when life seems particularly difficult, but every day, even moment by moment.

The gospel reading echoed our psalm by describing Jesus' care and compassion for us like that of a shepherd. Jesus is the one that cares for us, who gives us everything that we need, who feeds us, who corrects us. With Jesus accompanying us we have no need to fear evil, we know his goodness and loving mercy. Of course, it can be rather harder than we like to admit to rely completely on the Good Shepherd, to trust him with our whole lives. We tend to hold parts of our lives back, parts that we are too ashamed about, parts that are comfortable, parts that we have come to rely on instead of trusting in Christ alone. Jesus wants to enter these parts of our lives as well, we just have to trust him.

Trusting Jesus. There is a key thing. Are we willing to be like those reaching out to touch the fringe of his cloak, with complete abandonment, with empty outstretched hands just trusting that he desires all that is good, loving and true for us. We have to learn to trust that Our Lord knows what is best for us, even when we don't understand it ourselves. We need to come to him regularly in

prayer, with open hearts, and asking him what he wants of us. We must be constantly asking him to take control of our lives, releasing our fearful grip, and instead letting him take control. Bishop Robert Barron sums this up pithily when he says, 'My life does not belong to me; it belongs to God. My liberty is not mine; it is God's. My happiness is not something a pursue on my own terms; it is to be pursued on God's terms'.

Friends, God's will for our lives can only be partially known now, but we step forward in faith, in trust, knowing that as St Paul says 'in all things God works for the good' (Rom 8.28). Let us continue to ask the Lord to be the shepherd of our lives. I finish with a prayer of St John Henry Newman: 'O my God, I give myself to you. I trust you wholly. I ask not to see, I ask not to know – I ask simply to be used'.