

Sermon 18 July 2021 – Mark 6:30-35 and 53-end, Eph 2 11-end

Jesus for everyone – the big family of God.

How do you feel about large crowds of people?

A tricky question at the moment. Are you looking forward to less restriction after tomorrow, or are you concerned that this virus is not fully under control and anxious about what may be to come?

You will have been appalled by the behaviour of some members of the crowd at the football last week, but maybe, like me, you feel that the Olympics will be lacking something when supporters are unable to attend.

Crowds can encourage and inform us, think of the civil rights marches in America in the 1960's or more recently Greta Thornburg's climate change demonstrations, but they can also disrupt, causing the spread of misinformation and encouraging poor behaviour. And of course, crowds can be manipulated as Jesus himself experienced in the week leading up to his death.

Jesus had an uneasy relationship with crowds. Reading through the first 6 chapters of Mark, I was struck by the number of times Jesus is reported as trying to get away from them. In chapter 3 he told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd so that they would not crush him. In chapter 4 he is described teaching from a boat because the crowds were so large and in chapter 5 a sick woman joins the throng pressing against Jesus so that she can touch his cloak and be healed.

The alert amongst you will have noticed that today's Gospel passage is in two parts with a bit missed out in the middle. The part that is missed out includes the story of the feeding of the five thousand, one of the most striking accounts of Jesus interaction with a large number of people.

So, what is it that drew all these people to Jesus? Perhaps there is an element of entertainment. They had heard about miraculous healings and want to see for themselves but, it seems to me, in Jesus, they see something much more than an entertainer. In most of the accounts, Jesus is teaching. He is telling people about the Kingdom of God and how they should live their lives. Jesus is not just talking about these things; He is living the life too. He makes time for everyone, whoever they are, meeting their needs, healing everyone who touches him and feeding them, even though he does not always have time to eat himself. He is explaining a new order, and this is something they want to share and be part of.

In the Gospels, we learn about Jesus drawing together all sorts of people from different parts of the community. He includes people that would normally be considered unimportant; widows, children, lepers. He mixes with people others don't want to know; tax collectors, beggars and thieves. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus continues to draw people together and into the presence of God. Just before the passage we heard this morning, Paul says, (using the Message version again)

“Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus.”

Ephesus at the time of Paul's letter was an extremely crowded place. My bible dictionary describes it as the most important city in the Roman province of Asia. Silk from China, wheat from Egypt, almost anything

shipped to Rome is likely to have passed through the port of Ephesus. It was home of the Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the world. On the face of it, Ephesus was a thriving city, but all these different people rubbing alongside each other led to fighting, misery and discontent. People got rich through slave labour, the Roman army was required to suppress outbreaks of ethnic rivalry, people turned to cults, magic, drink, sex to escape from their troubles. Establishing a church amongst such a diverse group of people required some management. There was a particular division amongst the Jewish Christians, who had a tendency to think they were more special than other people, and the other's whom Paul refers to as "outsiders." Paul's letter includes some advice about why they should grow in harmony and how they might achieve this.

Jesus draws together all people, regardless of where they come from, what they do or who their ancestors were. No one is more special, no one has a greater entitlement. Through Jesus we are all the same before God. This message is as important for us today as it was for the people of Ephesus 2000 years ago. By looking at what Jesus did, we can reflect on the outsiders of today and how we can play our part in building God's undivided kingdom.

In the version we heard this morning, this passage is headed "He tore down the wall." There was no physical wall separating Jews and gentiles at this time, although there is now a barrier separating Israel from Palestine. Nevertheless, the Jewish people raised obstacles to keep themselves at a distance from others. I wonder if we raise obstacles which stop us getting to know others. Do we avoid talking to people who are different? Older people? Younger people? People who talk with a different accent? People with a different political point of view? Jesus had time for everyone. He had compassion for those in the crowds, feeding them even when he had little time to eat himself. The more we take time to know and understand people from as wide a range as possible, the more we can help grow God's kingdom. Here are some of the ways Jesus overcame such barriers.

- Jesus repealed the Law – The Jewish people had laws and rules about everything. What had started off as a practical means to survive in the wilderness, became a regime which prevented interaction with others. If you didn't follow the law you weren't a "proper Jew" and if you weren't a proper Jew, some people thought, you couldn't be a "proper Christian." Paul said "No" you can't earn your right to God's grace through following rules. The rules are there to help us do what is right, but God's grace is a gift.
- Jesus got us to embrace – Not being able to hug for 16 months has made us value the significance of touch and of being close to those we care for. Not everyone is comfortable with public hugging and kissing on the cheeks, but I for one still feel awkward when it comes to exchanging the sign of the peace and we can't shake hands. This part of our service allows us to settle any differences between ourselves before we come before God. The symbolism of a handshake in political or diplomatic terms can be enormous and is an important stepping-stone in reconciliation between those who disagree. We must respect each other's wishes regarding physical touch, but we need to come alongside each other to be part of God's family.
- Jesus preached the peace – From the temptation in the wilderness to his words to Judas at the last supper, Jesus spoke to those who disagreed with him. He sought peace in all circumstances, and we should do the same.
- Jesus treated us as equals – He valued everyone the same and taught love your neighbour as yourself. As well as talking to those who have a different view to us and we should listen to what they have to say. We may be surprised by what we learn.

Several years after Paul wrote this letter, the walls of God's home, the Temple in Jerusalem, were torn down when they were physically destroyed by the Romans. They have never been rebuilt. After Jesus, God has made his home in our hearts and that is where we find him today. So welcome to this big, chaotic family, where Jesus has time to minister to each of us, where we learn from each other and work through our differences to overcome obstacles and where our doors are open to support each other and our community.

Amen

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