

‘What are you pointing to?’

Sermon for Trinity 8 by Mark Pilgrim on Matthew 14.13-21

The toppling of Edward Colston’s statue meant more than the fall of an 18th century slave trader and philanthropist. It pointed beyond itself to at least three wider issues. Firstly, the fall of Colston’s statue signified frustration with the predominantly white, male powers-that-be in Bristol – powers that had ‘listened’ to requests for change but had prevaricated so long without changing anything that change was enacted by another route. Secondly, the fall of Colston’s statue brought to a head discussion and argument that had been going on elsewhere about the commemoration of other oppressors who nevertheless used their wealth to benefit other people in other ways – amongst them, most notably, Rhodes in Oxford. Thirdly, the fall of Colston’s statue made clear that British people shouldn’t fall prey to the temptation to think that racism was something that, with the death of George Floyd, only the USA needed to sort out: the fall of Colston’ statue pointed to how racism is still a part of this country’s make-up and people of all backgrounds and ethnicities need to address these issues.

In the same way Matthew’s account of Jesus feeding thousands of followers, also points to many things beyond itself. Here are three:

Firstly, there is the issue of sovereignty. Immediately before this story Matthew tells the story of Herod, the Roman Emperor’s representative in the region, holding a feast during which John the Baptist is killed. Herod embodies earthly power. His feast is held to buy people’s affection, to display his power, to bully people around him and as a location for death and destruction. Herod exercises the malignant power of the Roman Emperor. Moreover, these Roman emperors routinely proclaimed themselves to be ‘the Sons of God’.

How very different Jesus’ sovereignty is! Mathew portrays his Son of God as both alone and vulnerable but also as attractive to the common people. They are drawn to walk on foot to a deserted place to be with him. What happens in this place? Does this Son of God harangue or hurt them? No: he has compassion. He heals them. This Son of God does the very opposite of what the Roman gods and the sons of the gods would do: Roman rulers would only have mixed with and favoured the rich and powerful in their coteries and scheming groups. Jesus is the complete opposite. He is surrounded by the least, the last and the lost – and he cares for them.

Next, Matthew’s account of Jesus and the feeding of thousands points back – back into layers and layers of Israel’s history. Most obviously Jesus is repeating and amplifying the leadership of Moses. Jesus, like Moses, is with a large group of Israelites in a desert place. Just as in Exodus and the Israelites’ journey to the Promised Land, the leader’s companions, whether the twelve disciples or Aaron and the leaders of the tribes, don’t know what to do. They express doubts. They need encouragement and affirmation. So, what does Jesus do? He takes five loaves and two fish and makes them into a heavenly, nutritious meal.

Five and two, five and two...what’s special about those numbers? Most commentators reckon this: that the five loaves point to the first five books of the Old Testament, often called the Torah or Pentateuch, ‘the Law of Moses’. And the two fish point to the two fundamental pillars of Hebrew Scripture – the Law and the Prophets. At its heart the feeding of the thousands is saying that God’s word in scripture is equal in value as nutrition to bread and fish. And even beyond this again, the inclusion of bread and fish in the meal may point to everything in creation – on land and sea – being good for humanity’s health and nutrition, so long as we treat it right, as God intends.

Third and finally, Matthew’s account of Jesus feeding thousands points forwards. Placed twelve chapters before Jesus presides at the Last Supper, Jesus satisfying the hunger of thousands in a mystery-filled, surprising way anticipates the institution of Holy Communion which happens in chapter 26. The similarities

between the two passages are surely carefully drawn. Both start with the phrase 'when it was evening'. In both, Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, giving it to his disciples with the expectation that all will be nourished by this sustenance. In his description of the feeding of the thousands, Matthew makes no reference to the fish once they have been initially mentioned: his focus is entirely on the eucharistically reminiscent bread.

Last week I mentioned that Matthew places the series of parables we looked at at the physical centre of his Gospel, with the implicit message that these were key to his overall message: Jesus and the parables are one – they both point to the mystery and surprise of God. Placing the feeding of the thousands here is no less significant. Again, it is close to the heart of the gospel – and it comes as a lesson to the kind of divine king Jesus is. In contrast to King Herod, King Jesus is a fount of compassion, healing and generosity – a king who makes things happen in mysterious and surprising ways.

Throughout this passage Matthew is portraying Jesus as not only the successor but also the superior to Moses. Jesus is, in this part of the gospel as elsewhere, 'Emmanuel' – God with us...God with the ordinary people...God feeding, giving and being gracious to the least, the last and the lost. Whereas last week the message was 'Jesus is a parable of God the Father – full of mystery and surprise', the message this week is 'Jesus is a miracle: a sovereign with compassion, transcending time and transforming Creation wherever he finds himself.'

And the question this leaves us all with, I suggest, is this: 'How much is Jesus sovereign over our time? How much is Jesus sovereign over, in control of our relationships with people and creation? What further room do we have for Jesus to be sovereign over our compassion and at the centre of our time and space?

Understandably, Covid is absorbing and will continue to absorb our attention for some time to come. Our forthcoming 'What have you learned to love during lockdown' exhibition will enable us to appreciate what slowing down and having time to treasure new things in our lives has done for us. Being privy to some of the contributions coming in, I know that being more in touch with God's Creation and celebrating the help and compassion of other people is figuring quite highly in the material. The pandemic – arising in part from a lack of care for God's Creation – is giving us fresh opportunities to care for that same Creation afresh, especially if we can learn lessons about lessening pollution through transforming our expectations about air and car travel and other forms of energy use.

Last week the four ministers responsible for preaching in September got together to plan for a new season in the church's year. It's called 'Creationtide' and includes all the Sundays in September and the first Sunday in October. It incorporates both Harvest Festival and St Francis' Day and invites Christians across the country to focus on our relationship with the whole of Creation and increase our connection and compassion for people and all of life on the planet through it.

Included in our Creationtide are plans to incorporate short videos celebrating what St Peter's people are already doing in respect of caring for the environment, offering examples and inspiration for us all as they do so. In this way we, as a community, will have the opportunity to develop how the God revealed in Jesus is sovereign over our compassion and over the creation he has entrusted to our care right here in Henleaze and the surrounding area. Look out, then, for invitations later this month to take part in this media project, for which Kandis is already the guiding light.

So, to conclude: Edward Colston points to both philanthropy but, more importantly now, also to slavery. Jesus points to God's compassion and sovereignty. What, I wonder, are we pointing to? Let us pray, as we will do in the Lord's Prayer later in this service, that we may point beyond ourselves to God, hallowing God's name, doing God's will and helping God's kingdom come on earth as in heaven. Amen.