

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

2nd August 2020 – 9th Sunday after Pentecost

MATTHEW 14:13-21

CHRISTIAN COMPASSION – GOD’S LOVE IN ACTION

You may have seen this painting before; it’s called ‘Evicted’ and was painted by Blandford Fletcher in 1887. It hangs in the Queensland Art Gallery, and is the first painting they ever purchased, way back in 1895. (*you can search for the painting online, just type ‘Evicted painting’ into your search engine*). What do you see there? What jumps out at you? We see the scene of the lady who has obviously just been evicted from her home. She is dressed in black, telling us she is a widow. Her eyes are downcast, probably with no idea of what she will do now. The bundle she carries probably contains all her worldly goods. A child walks beside her, dragging a wooden horse. The bailiff stands by the door of what was her home, with a posture that suggests he is ‘just doing my job’.

But then, go wider. What do you see in the responses of the others here in this painting? As neighbours they would have known this woman and her child well, would have felt for her when her husband died, but how do they respond now? From their body language and the faces of those we can see, we might think that some are sympathetic, some are maybe worried because they know that they themselves could one day be in this situation, some might be wondering if they can give anything to help this lady and her daughter out, and some are perhaps judgmental and think that this lady should have known better and taken better care of her affairs. Sympathetic, afraid for themselves, compassionate, judgmental; how we can often look at people in bad situations.

A print of this painting now hangs beside our TV in our family room, the TV where we normally watch the news. What always strikes me are the eyes of the daughter, who appears to be about 10 years old. These eyes look straight out at you as if to ask, ‘What do you see? How will you respond?’

What do you see in this picture? (*Jesus and the disciples distributing bread to the hungry from our Gospel reading*) You will probably say you see hungry people now being fed. Very true.

What did the disciples see on this occasion? They saw people who needed food, lots of them. What they didn't see was any way they could help these people. How did they respond? They suggested to Jesus that He send the people away so they could get food for themselves.

What did Jesus see here? His first response comes back before that of the disciples'. Even though Jesus was upset at this time because of the death of His relative and friend John the Baptist, and so He had gone away to be alone, we are told that when Jesus saw the people He felt sorry for them, and He then responded by healing the sick. And then, later in the evening when the disciples suggested the people be sent away so they could get their own food, Jesus knew that with the small amount of food available to them He could satisfy the needs of the many. Jesus saw people in need, and He responded not by judging, or making excuses, or by complaining about limitations of what He could do; He responded by fulfilling those needs.

Perhaps this is one way we can define, or measure, love for one another, or this thing we often call 'compassion': What do we see? How do we respond?

We know that there are needs all around us, both near and far, don't we? You don't have to look too hard to see them. You watch, or hear, or read the news, and the needs are right there. You go to any public place and you can see the needs of people. Often when you start to talk to someone and to really listen to their story, even people close to you who you thought you knew a bit about, there is a need for compassion and action just under the surface, just behind the smiling face they usually show to everyone. Just as these needs are varied and far ranging, so too is the response required. The action required to help may be to donate money, food or goods, or to put some time in to help someone. Or it may be a listening ear, some comfort, support, or even just a smile for someone with whom you just have a brief encounter; wishing that shop worker who just had a difficult customer a nice day. We can't go through a single day, let alone life, without coming across many and varied needs of people. What do we see? How do we respond?

This account of Jesus feeding a large group of people is actually the only miracle story to be found in all four of the Gospels; Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. That's why we know the story so well. Each one of these writers wanted to show those who would read their accounts of Jesus' life that Christian compassion really is about God's love in action; that it is about seeing the needs of people, and then responding to them in a loving, caring way. This miracle also shows that even though we might feel that what we have to offer

may be so small that it is ineffective, God can and does work through whatever we offer to do great things for others.

What we have here, is a miracle story which captures and summarizes what Jesus' whole life on earth was all about; God seeing the needs of people, us, and responding to them. God seeing that we were lost and away from Him and doing whatever He could, including the ultimate sacrifice of sending His Son, to bring us back again. It is this compassion and forgiveness of the love of God, through Jesus, that we live in each day. Add on to that everything else God gives us, and the way He provides and cares for us. We know that God sees our needs and He responds in love; that's what we live in as Christians.

What is our call then, as Jesus' disciples, God's hands, in our world today? Well, let's go back and have a look at the exchange here in our reading to get some insight into that (*Matthew 14:15-17 CEV*). As we said before, the disciples saw a need which was too great for them to fulfill, so their response was to send the people away to find food for themselves. Jesus challenged that; 'Why don't you give them something to eat?' They had what they thought was a good response; "We have only five small loaves of bread and two fish". Surely even Jesus couldn't argue with that! How could they possibly feed a crowd of what we estimate to be about 12,000 people?

And then, we know, that after Jesus blessed the food and the disciples distributed it among the crowd, not only was there enough for each person to have their feed, but 12 baskets of leftovers were collected afterwards.

With God; a lot can be achieved with what seems to us to be a little.

Jesus challenged the disciples; look for what you can do with what you have in this situation, not what you can't.

The call for us; we are now God's heads, hearts, hands and feet in this world, and our call is to see and respond to the needs we see in the same way.

What do we see? How do we respond? Needs from overseas or further away from us. Needs around us in our community. Needs within our own family or those we see each day. The reason for this account here isn't to guilt us into thinking we should be doing more. Only each one of us knows our situation and what we can be doing. Instead it is a reminder that we are each called to respond to needs in whatever way

we can, and to never think that our response is only small and so can't make a difference. When we respond to needs as a disciple of Jesus, God works through us to do amazing things.

But, it is also a reminder that our call here is not to judge people; whether or not the situation they are in is the result of their own making isn't for us to worry about. Jesus doesn't say here, 'Oh, you silly people not bringing any food out here for you and your families! Now you'll just have to go hungry, and I hope you'll learn better for next time!' As much as, let's be honest, our first reaction is often to judge people for the situation they find themselves in, that's not our call. Our call, as disciples, is to see needs and respond to them.

God came into our world, as Jesus, to heal and to help. God saw the needs of His people, and He responded to them in the strongest way He could. As believers, as His followers, as His disciples, our call is to carry on His work. God's love and compassion is something we live in and experience each day. When we see the needs around us, however close or far away they are, what do we see? How do we respond? God give us hearts of love and service, so we can show that Christian compassion really is God's love in action. Amen.

FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION:

What Do We See? How Do We Respond?

Accounts like these are not meant to give us guilt about what we are or aren't doing for others, but to lead us to respond in compassion to others however we can. Consider:

- What are some of the needs you see? Close to you? In your community? In your nation or overseas?
- How can you respond to these needs?

Take, Bless, Break, Give

There is a strong allusion here between the account of this miracle and how God comes to us in Holy Communion. Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it out to the crowd. Sound familiar? Jesus continues to come to us today through this meal to satisfy our hunger and fulfill our needs.

- What does it mean for you that Jesus comes to you in Holy Communion? How are you filled in this meal?
- How does this meal then strengthen you to go out and share God's compassion with others?

From Little Things, Big Things Grow

The disciples saw an overwhelming need, feeding the large crowd, and inadequate resources to respond, five loaves and two fish. Jesus saw people in need, and that by the power and grace of God their needs could be filled. With God, no matter how much is given it makes a big difference.

- Are there needs of people which you find daunting and don't think you can respond to them. Ask God to help you to know how to respond.
- Ask God to help you see the needs around you this week, and to know that any response you make, no matter how small it may seem to you, God can use it to make a big difference to someone's life.