

6th August 2023

Matthew 14:13-21

GOD'S LOVE – RECEIVED AND SHARED

We sometimes hear aid agencies like World Vision say that their biggest challenge is to get people to see and take notice of the ads and appeals which they put up, without just quickly changing channels, turning the page, or scrolling past them. I'm sure we could spend a lot of time talking about why we as people do this, and the reasons are varied. There are so many needs out there that we know we don't see many of them. The war in Ukraine has been going on for well over 12 months, but news of it barely makes the daily broadcasts, even though many people are still dying, and many more being made homeless and having their lives turned upside down, each day. There are many other conflicts, natural disasters, situations where people live in severe hardship because of bad leaders, which we probably don't think about too much because that gets overwhelming. 'It's so big, what can I do?'

Do we have to look so far, to the other side of the world, to find examples of people in need? No, of course we don't, needs are all around us, aren't they? On the news each day we see the stories of people who are doing it tough; they've lost everything in a fire, they need money for life-saving medical treatment, they can't afford anywhere to live. And it's not just about material things. We see, sometimes firsthand, the needs which exist because of the hurt caused by relationship breakups, the lostness of those who can't see the point in going on with life, those who are lonely, those who have suffered trauma or hardships they don't think they will recover from. You can drive 10 minutes down the road from our church to Burleigh beach and see people driving around who are obviously living in their car, and others carting all their belongings around in a couple of bags as they look for a place to spend the day after sleeping out overnight. Needs are there, all around us, we know we don't need to look too hard to find them. When I look at them though, I so often think to myself, 'But it's so big, what can I do?'

Do you ever feel like that? Ever feel that there are so many needs out there, where do I start? Ever think to yourself, 'But it's so big, what can I do?' There's no doubt that that's the thought which

would have gone through the disciples' heads in today's Gospel story. The feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle story which is told in all four Gospels; Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Here in Matthew it comes straight after Jesus hears about the death of John the Baptist. Remember that Jesus and John were related, and, judging from the relationship their mothers had, we can assume they spent time together as they grew up. Added to that, their ministry was very closely linked; John's role was to prepare the way for Jesus, and Jesus insisted that John baptise him. So, we can imagine how Jesus would have felt when He heard John was executed, and all because of an ambitious woman's bitterness. Jesus naturally wanted time alone to grieve, so He went away by Himself.

But when you have earned a reputation as a teacher and miracle worker like Jesus had, it's not always easy to get time alone, even when you are grieving. The crowds, the needy crowds who were looking for something in their lives which they thought He could give them, they followed Him. Jesus is sad and tired, but what's His response when the crowds come to Him? He feels sorry for them. He sees their need and He begins to fill it by healing the sick. What came first for Jesus? Helping others.

Evening comes, and the crowds are still there. There are no takeaway places nearby, so the disciples ask Jesus to send the crowds away so they can go and buy some food. What's Jesus' response? Firstly, He doesn't want them to leave. They have chosen to come to Him, and He wants to minister to them. But secondly, He puts it back on the disciples, He says, 'Why don't you give them something to eat?' As they looked around at the crowd, how do you think they would have reacted to that? It seems they had the reaction which we often have, 'But it's so big, what can I do?' They were overwhelmed by the need which was right before them, and they didn't know how to begin to fill it? Sound familiar? Too much so, doesn't it?

And then what? We know it well. Jesus takes the five loaves and two fish which they have there. He gives thanks to God. He breaks the loaves. He hands it over to the disciples. And the result? Everyone has enough to eat, and 12 baskets of leftovers are collected at the end. Where the disciples saw only overwhelming problems, Jesus saw an opportunity to minister to people in their need and to provide for them. Jesus didn't say, 'But it's so big, what can I do?', He just went ahead and did it.

Note the four actions of Jesus in this miracle again: He took the bread, He gave thanks, He broke it, He gave it out to others. Ring any bells? It reminds us so much of the Last Supper, doesn't it, and of our own Holy Communion. And that's no coincidence, because that's one place where God now comes to us in our need; to minister, to give us the assurance of His forgiveness and His love in our lives. And, like the disciples, once we have received, we are now sent out to give. Many times we feel the pain of others, but we don't act on it. Jesus showed the disciples that they can turn their excuses into action because He has given them the means to help others. He gives us the same message also. Instead of asking the question 'But it's so big, what can I do?', we can instead ask, 'What would Jesus do in this situation, faced with this need?' Different question, very different response.

What would Jesus do? Turning feelings into action. Thinking about the situations of need we looked at earlier, overseas, in our country, in our community, in our lives, how will asking this question, and taking on this statement, how will that affect our response to them? On the one hand, we can donate money to the needs overseas, through organisations like Australian Lutheran World Service. That's good, but it's not just about guilting you into giving more. The attitude Jesus is illustrating and teaching here is about how we are first of all thankful to God for all He has given us, in abundance, and then we are looking at how He calls us to use these things to serve Him and others. So yes, it is partly about giving money to various appeals and charities. It's also about giving time to volunteer for community groups, our church, any group or person we can help out with. It's about looking for people in need and helping them, whether that's by offering a meal, a listening ear, help with some job or task. Maybe it's thanking and praising someone when they do something for us, even if it is their job. It could be cleaning out our cupboards and wardrobes and giving things to the Salvos or St. Vinnies, even good things we still want to hang on to but never use. We can't solve all the needs, but God gives us both the call and the means to start addressing needs around us.

And it's also about challenging and changing attitudes, even in our own small way. Do we need to speak out more sometimes about issues, even with our family and friends. Rather than getting caught up in the 'youth crime epidemic' hysteria, can we instead be asking ourselves and others: Who

are these young people? What is their life situation? Why are they doing what they are doing? What can we do for them? We might not change the government's, or other people's, view by ourselves, but we might get people thinking. In another way, our smiles, our kind words, our praise, our thanks, these are all things in our work, home and community which can help people in their need and make a difference, they can begin to change the feelings and attitudes of a place. God has given us many ways, big and small, to serve people in their need, and He calls us to move our feelings into actions and use them.

I'm going to be honest and say that this isn't the kind of theme that causes people to say to a pastor, 'oh Pastor, I was really encouraged and lifted up by your sermon today'. But it still needs to be spoken about, because it is shown to us by Jesus' example, and His teaching, to be a part of the life of discipleship and service we are called to as those who know God's love in our lives. We live in that love each day, and we know how great and generous it is. God help us to move from asking, 'It's so big, what can I do?', to asking, 'What would Jesus do in this situation?' A quote I read this week from Martin Luther says, 'It is true faith toward God, which loves and helps one's neighbour. This is the total life of Christians.' Know and recognize the love and abundance of God in your lives every day, pray for His eyes of compassion to see the needs of others, and pray for His attitude, wisdom and strength to fill these needs with what He has given you. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- 'It's so big, what can I do?': Do you ever feel like that? Are there any needs of others which make you feel overwhelmed about what has to be done to help them?
- Have a look at this Bible reading. Look at the reaction of Jesus to the crowd of people and their needs. Look at the reaction of the disciples. Which one are we normally more likely to follow?
- What would Jesus do? Turning feelings into action: Thinking about the situations of need we know, whether they are closer to us or further away. How does asking this question and following Jesus' call and example change the way we react and respond to the needs we see?

Pray: thank God for all the blessings we have in our lives, and how He supplies us with more than we need. Ask God to help us to both see the needs of others and respond to them with the same love and compassion He shows to us.

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