

Matt.14:13-21

It is a brilliantly helpful introduction to a Gospel reading, don't you think: 'Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place....' When Jesus heard what? The answer is that he had just heard of the murder of John the Baptist in Herod's prison – and I suspect that is not irrelevant to understanding what comes next in Matthew's story, the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. Interestingly, Mark, who Matthew was in large measure copying, doesn't link the two stories: they're next to each other, as in Matthew, but with no connection. It's Matthew who tells us to think harder about the connection between that little phrase, 'Now when Jesus heard this...'

What after all had Jesus heard? Of John's death, yes, but what did that death mean? Well, first of all it was a personal blow. All the Gospels tell us that Jesus and John were close – reading between the lines one can imagine that it may have been a tense relationship at times, but their lives were deeply intertwined from the beginning. So Jesus fled the crowds to grieve. But it was grief not just over the personal loss but over what it meant too: in the horrendous murder of the prophet, wasn't Israel or at least royal Israel showing its true face – a face which violently rejected God and his will? Jesus grieved for Israel, and perhaps he also began to realise that he too might meet John's fate.

And so Jesus goes into the deserted place, into the wilderness. And the physical desolation of that place no doubt echoed the desolation he felt all around him. In that place, in the aftermath of John's death, Jesus contemplated the ruin of Israel, God's chosen people who he saw choosing not to be God's.

And what comes next into that solitude? A great crowd, of that same people, coming

to him with their needs and sicknesses and hunger. You could almost think of this as yet another temptation in the wilderness: the temptation this time to say, what's the point? John died, Israel is ruined – what I have to do with all these crowds, who are just out for what they can get, whose heart is not with God, who will turn against me one day? 'Heal yourselves' screams Jesus in the musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and I've always thought Tim Rice was onto something putting those words in his mouth.

But that's not how Jesus reacts. He had compassion for them, says Matthew; Mark says he pitied them like sheep without a shepherd. He is not angry, he does not despise, he does not reject. Rather, in the midst of desolation, Jesus loves on. And because of that enduring, everlasting compassion things happen: the sick are healed, lives are put back together again. The ruins are built up. Its as if the divine compassion is saying, Israel cannot be lost. Even as the prophet's blood gets mopped off the dungeon floor, even when Israel speaks such a lethal 'no' to God, God will rebuild. 'You shall be my people, and I shall be your God': the failure of Israel is not an option.

And what better sign of that could there be than the miracle of feeding? Israel had been born travelling in a wilderness, fed by God with Manna from Heaven. Look, says Matthew, Exodus is happening again: the nation is being reborn. And this isn't mere survival rations, this is abundance, with baskets and baskets full remaining afterwards. This is like the great feast which people thought would happen at the end of time in the Kingdom of God, except it is happening here and now, just when history seemed empty and violent and dead.

Now what does all of this mean for us? Matthew gives the clue in the way he tells the story: 'he looked up to heaven, blessed and broke the loaves, gave them to the disciples'. Does any of this sound familiar? It is what we shall do in a few moments: bless and break bread, take and eat. Matthew tells the story this way to make a point: our Eucharist joins up with what went on in the wilderness that day. Here, like that lost and needy crowd in a deserted place, we meet the abundant compassion of God and experience his astounding creativity, his boundless generosity.

Well, what does all of this have to do with us? A concrete example. Archbishop Rowan, speaking to the assembled bishops at Lambeth this week, about the rows in the Anglican Communion over homosexuality. There's a fairly graceless situation, with a fairly deep lack of charity on all sides – a kind of desolation in its way. Rowan's question was this: is Jesus able to touch people in such a way that they're able to do something fresh, and generous, which helps build up the ruins? Can he open up hearts that have been shut against others? Or take a marriage which has turned sour, in which husband and wife are not a gift to each other but a burden – a constant, low level grinding down of the spirit? Can Jesus take that, and do something beautiful? Or can he take the parts of me which I have repressed, which I'm frightened of and deny, and make all of me a new creation?

The message of today's Gospel – of the whole Gospel - is that he can. It is an astonishingly simple Gospel, if astonishingly hard to accept and believe and trust, but it is truly Gospel, truly good news to sing and dance and worship about. For we are not on our own, with our own meagre resources – our own poor imaginations, our own limited desires. We are in touch with something infinitely richer: the power that called the stars into existence, which called from nothing everything that is and which raises the dead. Which can certainly, then, change me and you, and make us pure love. It may take time to have its effects, it may be a lifetime's work, but that that is the power to which we will be exposed in a few moments, as we receive the body and blood of Christ. Our desolation is at an end, and our ruins are being built up. Thanks be to God, Amen.