

The Wholeness of Christ ...

... what is it we are looking for?

A sermon given on Seventh Sunday After Trinity 18th July 2021, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in the Online Attended Communion Service

Mark 6:30-34;53-56

Well, tomorrow is supposedly 'Freedom Day', when at last all remaining legal restrictions imposed in response to COVID are finally removed. Well, whatever your personal views about that, it's clear that for a lot of people, the opportunity to gather together is more important than guarding against the possibility of infection. You only had to watch the crowd at Wembley for the football final last weekend to see how when a goal was scored, the last thing on anyone's mind was social distancing. And we've seen it closer to home as well. At recent weddings and funerals, families have instinctively clustered together. Which makes me wonder, what are the things that bring people out in crowds, even when it might be risky or inconvenient?

In our gospel reading, it's clear that Jesus had that effect on people. It's a very busy passage with a lot of coming and going and rushing about and with people gathering in crowds. The context is one of a period of intense ministry, and Jesus and his disciples are trying to get away to rest and recharge the batteries. But wherever they go, there are crowds. *'Many saw them going and recognised them'*, Mark says, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd. And on the way back, at the end of the passage, when they got out of the boat, people at once recognised him and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick en-masse to wherever they heard he was.

So it seems wherever Jesus went, there were crowds. People are willing to change their plans to disrupt their normal daily routines and to travel distances simply in order to see Jesus. And the question is why? What did people see in Jesus that made them willing to interrupt whatever it was they were doing and gather in great crowds? And one of the differences with today is that all this seems to have been quite spontaneous. The crowds I can think of today at Wembley or a big family event are planned events, with tickets and invitations and planning. But the crowds around Jesus just happen wherever he goes, even when he's trying to keep a low profile and avoid people. And the passage hints at why this might have been the case. In the

first place when Jesus saw the great crowd, he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. That image of sheep and shepherds was used in the Old Testament to describe an army, and a sheep without a shepherd was an like an army without a commander or a nation without a prophet to lead it.

Jesus has compassion on people who are looking for direction, who have lost their sense of purpose, who need a goal, a vision, a sense of being part of something bigger than themselves. And where the church shows that kind of compassion, where gently and sensitively she offers people leadership and a sense of purpose, then still today there's something attractive about that, and people will gather.

We're told that Jesus expressed his compassion by teaching people, '*He taught them many things*', Mark tells us. It's frustrating that he doesn't tell us exactly what sort of things Jesus taught them - presumably it wasn't how to blow eggs or do the three card trick. Elsewhere in the Gospels, it's clear that Jesus went around teaching about the kingdom of God, how when people respond to God as king, the results can be seen in a growth of justice and righteousness, in compassion and mercy, and wholeness and peace. So maybe we should take notice of that; maybe the church would be a whole lot more attractive if we talked less about the church and more about God's kingdom. So Jesus was attractive and drew the crowds because he had compassion on the people and offered them vision and leadership, and because he taught them and encouraged them to live as citizens of God's kingdom.

And the other thing in this passage is that it's clear he healed people. Wherever he went into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and begged him that they might they might touch even the fringe of his cloak. And all who touched it were healed.

So wherever Jesus was present, there was healing. Healing in the scriptures is always about more than medical healing. It's about forgiveness and the healing of relationships; it's about inclusion and the integration of outcasts back into society; it's about the wholeness of body, mind and spirit. And it's clear this healing was experienced across the whole spectrum of society, rich and poor alike, those in cities and those on farms. It took place wherever the Lord was present.

And maybe this is language we just don't use often enough. Tthere is healing in the name of Jesus: whenever we gather around the Lord's table, God is putting us back

together again, accepting, forgiving, including, integrating, reconciling, offering peace in body, mind and spirit, even where there are medical conditions that may never change. So the crowds gather whenever the compassion of Jesus leads to teaching about the gospel and the kingdom of God; they gather where there is healing a new life; they gather when Jesus himself is present.

We're starting to talk here at the minster about our vision strategy for the future, parts of which focus on becoming more like Christ and reaching those we currently don't. If we can do those things, the church will grow simply because it will become more attractive. If we can show compassion like Christ; if we can offer a compelling vision of Christ for how life can be lived with him; and if we can be a healing community building one another up and supporting one another in the name of Christ, then we won't have to worry about numbers - Jesus himself is attractive.

And if we can allow ourselves to be drawn more closely to him, others will inevitably follow, especially perhaps those who are rushing to and fro; those who are so busy and distracted they don't know what to do with themselves; those who perhaps are still unsure what it is they're really looking for.

Reading Texts

Mark 6:30-34;53-56

³⁰ The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

³² And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴ As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things

⁵³ When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. ⁵⁴ When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, ⁵⁵ and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶ And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.