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Service for the 8th Sunday after Trinity, 25th July 2021

A warm welcome to all who share in worship with us today.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise. The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The Lord is faithful to all his promises. I will exalt you, my God. I will praise your name. (words from Psalm 145)

HYMN: Ye servants of God

If you would like to sing this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.

1 Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim,
and publish abroad his wonderful name;
the name, all victorious, of Jesus extol;
his kingdom is glorious and rules over all.

2 God ruleth on high, almighty to save;
and still he is nigh--his presence we have.
The great congregation his triumph shall sing,
ascribing salvation to Jesus, our King.

3 Salvation to God, who sits on the throne!
Let all cry aloud and honour the Son.
The praises of Jesus the angels proclaim,
fall down on their faces and worship the Lamb.

4 Then let us adore, and give him his right,
all glory and pow'r, all wisdom and might,
all honour and blessing, with angels above,
and thanks never ceasing and infinite love.

Charles Wesley

PRAYERS of Thanksgiving & Confession

Let us pray

We thank you, Father, that you go ahead of us, pouring out your love into our community, transforming our homes, our workplaces and our schools. Transforming us, so that we can play our part in your plans. We thank you that we can now begin to come together again at church, cautiously, to share all the gifts that you have given us. Even though we have gone astray, you are our Shepherd – the one who brings us back to the fold. We are assured of your forgiveness, and we are set free in the knowledge that you always make room for us.

Amen.

Forgive us, Lord, for the times when we haven't been as generous as we could have been with our time and money in helping others, and with making them feel appreciated; for when we could have gone the extra mile, but didn't; for when – despite having been blessed with so many – we weren't as generous as we could have been with our gifts and talents. Most generous God, help us to be more like you.

Amen.

Heavenly Father, you forgive us when we make mistakes, and when we fail to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. We come to you now, knowing that we are healed and forgiven, and that we've been given another chance to be the people you call us to be.

Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name;

Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever.

Amen.

HYMN: I heard the voice of Jesus

*If you would like to **sing** this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment*

1 I heard the voice of Jesus say,
"Come unto me and rest.
Lay down, O weary one,
lay down your head upon my breast."
I came to Jesus as I was,
forlorn and faint and sad.
I found in him a resting place,
and he has made me glad.

2 I heard the voice of Jesus say,
"Behold, I freely give
the living water, thirsty one;
stoop down and drink and live."
I came to Jesus, and I drank
of that life-giving stream.
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,
and now I live in him.

3 I heard the voice of Jesus say,
"I am this dark world's light.
Look unto me, your morn shall rise,
and all your day be bright."
I looked to Jesus, and I found
in him my star, my sun,
and in that light of life I'll walk
till trav'ling days are done.

H Bonar

SCRIPTURE READING St John 6: 1-15

¹After this, Jesus went across Lake Galilee (or, Lake Tiberias, as it is also called). ²A large crowd followed him, because they had seen his miracles of healing the sick. ³Jesus went up a hill and sat down with his disciples. ⁴The time for the Passover Festival was near. ⁵Jesus looked around and saw that a large crowd was coming to him, so he asked Philip, "Where can we buy enough food to feed all these people?" (⁶He said this to test Philip; actually he already knew what he would do.)

⁷Philip answered, "For everyone to have even a little, it would take more than two hundred silver coins to buy enough bread."

⁸ Another one of his disciples, Andrew, who was Simon Peter's brother, said, ⁹ "There is a boy here who has five loaves of barley bread and two fish. But they will certainly not be enough for all these people."

¹⁰ "Make the people sit down," Jesus told them. (There was a lot of grass there.) So all the people sat down; there were about five thousand men. ¹¹ Jesus took the bread, gave thanks to God, and distributed it to the people who were sitting there. He did the same with the fish, and they all had as much as they wanted. ¹² When they were all full, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces left over; let us not waste a bit." ¹³ So they gathered them all and filled twelve baskets with the pieces left over from the five barley loaves which the people had eaten.

¹⁴ Seeing this miracle that Jesus had performed, the people there said, "Surely this is the Prophet who was to come into the world!" ¹⁵ Jesus knew that they were about to come and seize him in order to make him king by force; so he went off again to the hills by himself.

SERMON: *Mr Chris Wall*

There were times, as in today's reading, when Jesus needed to get away from it all – from the crowd and their needs. He was always under pressure and needed regular rest and time to eat, as we all do – and his twelve disciples needed the same. He was fully God, but also fully human.

But there were other reasons why Jesus sometimes needed to get away from it all.

St Matthew hints strongly, in his gospel, that Jesus didn't want to bring attention on himself and so suffer the same fate as John the Baptist – not earlier than intended, anyway. Here, the apostle John instead prefers to stress that Jesus wanted to bring his disciples to a quiet place, so he could spend time leading them into a better understanding of both himself and his teaching. The phrase John uses "... and Jesus sat down with his disciples..." offers his readers the image of how Jewish rabbis began teaching their disciples: by 'sitting down' and inviting them to gather around and listen.

It's the same with us. Maybe it's difficult to listen to what Jesus wants to say to us if there are many people and lots of noise around. My wife and I take great pleasure, when we're on holiday, in getting out of the heat and hustle & bustle by slipping into the silence and coolness of a church: having a moment or two on our own, with God.

The problem was that the crowds were so amazed by what Jesus had been doing – especially his healing of their diseases – that they'd walked from Capernaum around the northern shore of Lake Galilee keeping their eyes fixed on Jesus' boat; so when he and his disciples got out at Bethsaida, after just two or three miles of sailing, the people had followed them.

While Jesus knew this place as one where they could usually find quiet, they weren't alone for long; but although he was often under pressure, Jesus never considered anyone a nuisance – quite the opposite. It was here that the miracle of feeding about five thousand men, plus women and children (so perhaps seven or eight thousand people altogether) took place. (Why does John only mention the five thousand **men**? Probably because Jewish Law prevented women and children from eating with men, in public.)

The Passover Festival wasn't far away and from the way John writes, it's clear that he wanted to tell his readers – initially the Early Church – that many other people from all over that part of the world were passing by on their way to Jerusalem. They were attracted by what was going on around Jesus and were joining the crowd, making it larger and larger.

St Luke tells us in his gospel account that Jesus welcomed the crowd, spoke to them about the Kingdom of God, and healed those who needed it. Imagine if, after a hard day at work, you'd found a nice, quiet place to be with your friends or family, only to be invaded by loads of people demanding more of your time. Understandably, you might be a bit 'put out'. All day long, Jesus had given himself to this crowd, healing their bodies and lifting their burdens; nevertheless, he still didn't resent them continuing to follow him: he actually welcomed it.

For Jesus, human need always took preference over everything else. His compassion for the people was aroused immediately, because he recognised their spiritual and physical needs. St Mark tells us "his heart was filled with pity for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd". Imagine going off into the Welsh mountains without someone who knows the area – then bad weather sets in and you become disorientated. Even in our everyday lives, we can sometimes find ourselves losing our way. It is then we need someone like Jesus, the 'Good Shepherd', to get us back on the right track so that we can feel at ease again.

By then it was getting late in the day and Jesus was concerned that the people had become tired and hungry. So, because Philip was from Bethsaida like Peter and Andrew and knew the area well, Jesus asked him "Where shall we buy bread for all these people to eat?". John tells us that Jesus was testing Philip, because he had already decided what to do, but wanted to find out what Philip's reaction would be. This was a great moment for Philip to prove his faith.

Justifying Jesus' thoughts, Philip says "That's impossible! For everyone to have just a small piece of bread, we would need to spend at least 200 denarii", which he had already calculated was well beyond their budget. (A working man's daily take-home pay was one denarius, so 200 denarii would take a man eight months to earn.) We all have our own limits when it comes to spending money: a point at which we say "No, we can't afford it!". We might say "you can't make a silk purse out of a pig's ear" or "you can't get blood out of a stone"; but "can't" is a word we should never use when talking about Jesus. He turned water into wine, raised people from the dead and built his Church from a small group of ordinary working men – all of them sinners, like us!

Andrew goes a little further to search for a solution to the problem. He doesn't look at what can't be done, but at what can be done. He says: "There's a boy here who has in his basket five barley loaves and two small fish, but that certainly won't be enough to feed this lot!" So, whilst Andrew is slightly more optimistic than Philip, neither of them really understood that while impossible situations are not necessarily solved by what's in our cupboards or our bank accounts, they can occasionally be solved by our faith in God to perform a miracle.

Now, each of these loaves would have been about the size of a bap, and, as they were made of barley rather than wheat, they were cheaper to make and normally eaten by the poor.

(Barley was often used in animal food.) The fish were, most likely, two of the most common type in the lake, about the size of a sardine; so they'd be cheap too. People used to pickle these fish to keep them fresh. Because this boy was holding five small loaves and two fish, it's probable that he was carrying the food for the whole family. If that were so, I don't suppose the rest of the family were too happy when he offered to give it all away.

Then Jesus tells his disciples to get the people to sit down so that he could talk to them while they ate. Jesus took the bread, gave thanks to his Father for it, and distributed it amongst the people. Then he did the same with the fish. When he blessed these, or said 'grace' as we might call it, he would have used the same words as the father of any Jewish family at the start of any family meal, "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the World, who causest bread to come forth from the earth".

The other three gospel writers say that the people all ate, and were filled. The Greek word used here for 'filled' meant 'filled to bursting'. (Do you know that feeling when you just can't eat any more? I had it myself once, when my wife and I were in Boston and I had to leave a solitary, massive battered king prawn: I just couldn't manage it and I couldn't sleep for a couple of nights in frustration. I couldn't ask for a 'doggy bag' for one prawn, could I, big as it was?) In Israel at the time, it was common practice at the end of a meal, if you were fairly well off, to leave a little for those who had served you, usually a servant. So when Jesus asked his disciples to collect what was left, the amazing thing was that each of the disciples' baskets was filled to the brim. These were only small baskets, shaped like a bottle, which Jews in those days usually took on their travels; nevertheless, Jesus had created far more food than was actually needed.

This is the only miracle, apart from the resurrection, which is recorded in all four gospels; so the event must have made quite an impression on the disciples. It shows Jesus to be the 'supplier of human need' and sets the stage for Him to claim to be the 'Bread of Life'. What was Jesus' reason for performing this miracle? We can never know exactly, but we can look at the miracle in three different ways....

Firstly, we can look at it simply as a miracle of multiplication: a display of power. Because we can understand the miraculous character of Jesus' actions, that's one explanation. But some Christians find it difficult to reconcile that with the Jesus who, at his temptation, refused to perform a miracle just for the sake of it.

Secondly, we can look at this miracle as a symbol of a sacramental meal. In the remainder of this chapter, Jesus goes on to talk about eating his flesh and drinking His blood. Maybe, when the crowd took just a morsel of bread, it was enough to richly nourish their hearts and minds, just as it does for us, when we take Holy Communion.

Thirdly and finally, it may well have been that many of the crowd had at least some food with them. Indeed, it would have been extremely unusual for orthodox Jews to go out for the whole day without taking provisions with them in their little baskets, which kept their food clean and pure. (This had even become a bit of a joke amongst the occupying Romans.) So, when Jesus started sharing the boy's offering amongst the people, perhaps those who had food were moved by Jesus' example and did exactly the same. In this way

there became enough food for everybody. Thus with this miracle Jesus turned a large crowd of individuals into a community of sharers: people who cared for one another.

I'm sure that, when we hear this story, we all paint a picture in our minds of what happened that day. Today, you may have thought about the way Jesus drew people from all around, of all nationalities, even those just passing through, rich and poor, just to see his healing power and hear his radical teaching. You may have thought about his compassion in making sure the hungry were fed. You may even have thought about the difference in the attitude of Philip and Andrew – Philip being the more negative, who saw only problems. “The situation is hopeless”, he was saying, “Nothing can be done”. Andrew, on the other hand, was more positive, saying: “Hang on a minute, this lad here has five small loaves and two fish, so that's a start!” So Andrew must have thought Jesus could do something with these things, which brings me to the boy in the story. In bringing this small meal to Jesus, he was providing him with the ingredients for a miracle. In the same way today, we never know what Jesus can do with the small things we offer him.

I just want to spend a few moments, talking about the confidence and the encouragement we can draw from what that boy did. He didn't have a lot to offer, when you think about the size of the task; but what he had he brought, and Jesus used it to make something far greater than anyone could possibly have imagined. One scholar has written: “Had that boy not offered to Jesus the bit that he had, there would have been one great deed fewer in history”.

Today in Walsall and in the wider world, God still wants us to bring him anything that will enable him to continue the ministry he began over two thousand years ago: bringing the Good News to those who need to hear it. He is anxious to improve the lives of people today just like the crowds to whom Jesus gave physical and spiritual food at Bethsaida. That includes those with mental health problems, those who suffer racism, those who are sick, hungry, lonely, homeless, those in financial difficulties, those who mourn, those with alcohol and other addictions, and – last but not least – those who are discriminated against for following him. We must never be led to believe that God can't put all our contributions together, however small they may be individually, to make something much bigger.

Not just that, but it may well be that if we don't bring that little bit we have to God, through the church or any other way, the world may be denied miracle after miracle. There's no limit to what God can do, so there is no reason to apologise or feel embarrassed if we don't have much to offer. Very little can become an awful lot in the hands of Christ.

I have a good friend called Martin, a brilliant cake-maker who, until recently when his health deteriorated, had a ministry of baking cakes for people he knew who were celebrating a birthday or a special occasion. He loved doing it, as it was his way of showing his love for others. Visiting a sick neighbour or offering to pick up their prescription is another way of showing that love, as is buying fairly-traded goods or writing to our MP to express concern about an issue in our community – and you're likely to get a reply on House of Commons note-paper!

To do any of these things, you don't have to be young, wealthy or physically fit. Virtually anyone can make a contribution to God's work. I read an article not long ago that was based on today's reading: it was headed 'If you have a pulse, you qualify'.

It's strange how you can be so familiar with a story, yet next time you read it you see something new. For me this week, it was all about a boy who, overhearing the discussions between Jesus and his disciples, came forward and said "I have some food here, you can have that". His parents were probably a bit annoyed with him to start with, but later so proud of him.

Next time we think we have little of substance to offer to Jesus, let's not be pessimistic. Rather, let's just think about that boy with his five loaves and two fish, hand over what we have, and leave the rest to God.

May the Lord bless you all in your ministry here at Broadway Church.

PRAYERS of intercession

Let us pray

Lord God, as we come to you again today, we bring to you the things we do and say, and the impact they have on those around us. Our words and our actions have consequences. The world has moved on and the older we are, the harder it is to move with it. So we're looking to you, Father, to help us to use whatever influence we have more sensitively. We are seeking your guidance, wisdom and love in making our decisions, because we want to learn more about your ways. Help us to listen for your voice and to follow your directions, so that we can walk every day in your love.

Lord, you became poor, so that we might become rich. In a world of inequality, we pray that you would show us how to share our riches with those who are in need.

We pray for those who seek refugee status here in the UK. We can't begin to understand what they have been through in their own countries. For those who manage to stay, we pray that our local authorities and communities will find ways to make them feel welcome. We pray for those in insecure work, those in low-paid work and those with no work; for those who have few luxuries and little self-respect. We thank you for those who give up their free time to work in food-banks, outreach centres and for charities.

Lastly, Lord we pray for ourselves. Lord God, our generous provider, as the young boy in our reading offered to Jesus all the food his family had, we come today offering you all we have. We know that, however small our gift or offering is, you will do amazing things with it, more than we could ever imagine.

Father, we thank you for all that you provide for us in so many ways, and for reminding us today of how you took a little and multiplied it for the benefit of so many. So, take whatever we offer, and make it so much more.

Eternal God, you hear our prayers and you know those people for whom we are praying; so we commit them, and ourselves, into your loving hands.

Amen.

HYMN: Forth in thy name

*If you would like to **sing** this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.*

1 Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go,
my daily labour to pursue,
thee, only thee, resolved to know
in all I think, or speak, or do.

2 The task thy wisdom hath assigned
O let me cheerfully fulfil,
in all my works thy presence find,
and prove thy good and perfect will.

3 Thee may I set at my right hand,
whose eyes mine inmost substance see,
and labour on at thy command,
and offer all my works to thee.

4 Give me to bear thy easy yoke,
and every moment watch and pray,
and still to things eternal look,
and hasten to thy glorious day;

5 For thee delightfully employ
whate'er thy bounteous grace has given,
and run my course with even joy,
and closely walk with thee to heaven.

Charles Wesley (altd)

It's been a joy to be with you today. Thank you all for either being here in person or for following the service from home. I'll see you all again soon, I hope. Until then, 'shalom'. Stay safe and well.

BLESSING

Let us pray

Heavenly Father, as we leave here today, keep us focussed on your loving and generous nature, so that we can freely share what we have and who we are. Let us be cheerful givers and humble receivers.

May the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be with us this coming week, wherever we are and whatever we're doing.

Amen.