



22 July 2018

Preacher: Jen Smith

Hymns: **Hymn 409** **Let us build a house (all are welcome)**
 Hymn 492 **Christ be my leader by night as by day**
 Hymn 481 **The Lord's my shepherd (I will trust)**
 Hymn 401 **Come sinners to the Gospel feast**

Six month memorial for Jennifer Akua Akyaa Offeh
Died 3 dec 2017, family members for blessing

Readings: Psalm 23 (StF 805)
Mark 6. 30-56 (read in two parts, 30-46; 47-56)

“Understanding about the loaves”

Prayer

Holy God, break your word among us as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips, and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength, and our redeemer. AMEN.

First, friends, a blessing on all of you and the journey you have made to get here today – be it long or short. Be they physical journeys in Planes, trains, automobiles or a faith journey through the whole that life can throw at us. Blessing on you today in the name of Jesus Christ. .

I hope no one this morning had to come across stormy waters in a small boat - to strike fear into the heart like our disciples – but if you have, actually or metaphorically, then the blessing particularly on you today: Jesus has seen our tumult and he is coming - changing course to come to help us. Do not fear he is no ghost!

...Immediately he spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’ Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.’

Hang on, did I hear rightly? They did not understand about the loaves? What is Mark on about here, we’re in the middle of a killer storm and he is talking bread?

If I’m in that boat with a ghost coming towards me and the wind blowing so as to take us under – of course I’m not thinking about yesterday’s lunch. Loaves or otherwise.

But this is Mark’s exact point, to the reader, as we watch the disciples on this journey.

Why are they afraid? Why are we? Not the storm, not the ghost – no – they are afraid because they have not understood about the loaves! This is NOT a condemnation of fear – note that – but of being afraid of the wrong things, or in an

unnecessary unhealthy way, a self perpetuating, self reinforcing kind of fear. A cringing divisive fear, a closed circle making it impossible even to call for help.

Somehow they have absorbed a mindset, been hardwired to interpret events in a negative way. And that negative mindset has been durable enough to withstand even the most miraculous feeding they have just seen and you have just heard about.

We usually tell these two stories separately – the feeding and the storm – but they are one story. And we usually tell the feeding bit as a story of abundant blessing – the disciples all jolly and feeling good, look – a miracle, 12 baskets left over! That’s how I learned it in Sunday school, certainly.

We do not tell this story as one showing the disciples’ hardened mindset that almost programmes them to feel anxious – fearful and self-protective whatever happens. But here it is – how many times something in scripture is right there in front of us, and we read so quickly, or with such a set view we do not see it! Just like the disciples, despite even the presence of proper signs and wonders, they have a narrative in which things are scarce, life is hard, and food security is for someone else. Success here would be having a lot stored up, and security that no one is going to take it away. I think we can do better than that.

What would it be like then, for the disciples if they did understand about the loaves, and what difference would it make for the disciples, and for us, if we did?

What difference would it make to our society, if folk had confidence in our collective ability to provide enough, for all people? If we had that confidence? What if, instead of a narrative of scarcity and protection, the disciples had a narrative, a mindset that even in the face of danger, even when we are most afraid or in the midst of the storm said ‘there will be bread?’

And I can risk inviting 5000 and more, and know I can give hospitality? We’ll get back to bread, which incidentally is my favourite food.

But just now I want to celebrate the members of this church, and the other Methodists from around London who are even right now on the third day of our away weekend, called ‘Moving Stories.’

On the theme ‘Moving Stories,’ we have been sharing our testimony about migration gathered from around the London District of the Methodist Church – and considering our own stories in light of God’s story. Also considering how to change a climate of fear of migrants to a climate of welcome.

Here is news which should not be a shock to anyone who seeks to follow Jesus Christ: each person, every person bears the image of God all through them.

Welcome, or hospitality, wasn’t straightforward for the disciples, it isn’t easy for us, it certainly is not easy for our society and our nations and yet – and here is good news - something in us still clings to the hungers that it will be so – that welcome of all not just some will be real will be is normal.

We might all have very different notions of what good immigration policy would be, but we honour our hunger for the new world by being here this morning. And we honour the basic premise that welcome of each person as bearing the image of God is a basic Biblical value. As the disciples honoured their hunger for the new world by getting into the boat and setting out when Jesus told them to get into the boat.

There is an absolute realism in Mark 6 about the lack of resources that the disciples felt like they had to welcome folk with, which mirrors the realism I hear people talk about in our own public life. We just do not have the resources to deal with this. Accommodation, schools, jobs, benefits and more pressure on the NHS? Send them away! And the 'them' changes over time – French heugenot – Jews fleeing the pogroms, and then the holocaust, how many fleeing genocide, and today. The them has changed – but friends we are among the hungry.

The pattern of events that get the disciples to the place where they are in that boat – having the reactions they have – the mindset or narrative that says be careful, there won't be enough for me too - I recognise those emotions, I recognise that mindset in our common life.

Let's talk about the disciples' desire to do the right thing, and their fear of open-hearted hospitality, and their saying no, send them away about the outsiders in their midst. Because at the beginning of our reading today they had run out of resources – energy, time, money, food – and Jesus had taken them away to recuperate, and then the hungry ravenous crowd had followed – and they asked Jesus, sensibly, to send them away!

It wasn't that they hadn't wanted to feed the crowd – that 5000 who had followed Jesus out to the deserted place. It wasn't that they had not read the scripture or knew what they would want to do, in a perfect world – but they had no bread, not even for themselves – with stretched resource, only a fool would open the borders, right? It isn't that we don't want to welcome refugees, migrants, anyone in this country. It is just that in our present narrative of scarcity of resources, it is beyond our imagination that we have the resource to do it. As it was beyond the imagination of the disciples that they would have resource to feed the 5000. And as long as it is a them, outside of me and mine, then that conclusion becomes desperately, horribly, reasonable.

The disciples were astounded by Jesus stilling the storm, because it says, 'they had not understood about the loaves.'

If they had 'understood about the loaves', what would have been different? The storm still would have raged. The folk still would have needed feeding, the 12 baskets gathering. But somehow, there is a sense that they would not have been afraid. Or if afraid, atleast afraid of better things. They would have recognised Jesus coming towards them on the waves.

Do you see the text says he was intending to pass by, but seeing their distress changed course and came to them? Think about God changing course to come to you or me in our complete bewilderment. Not when we are feeling faithful and

assured, but exactly when we have lost the sense of God and think it is all ghosts and phantoms. Then Jesus changes direction, it is then he comes to us.

Friends it seems to me there are plenty of things in this life, storms to make us afraid. There is plenty around to teach us a narrative of scarcity – it is so seductive! There is plenty to counsel us in the midset that there will not be enough and so we must protect and hoard – plenty to harden the heart so we do not understand about the loaves. Even Jesus' demonstration on that hillside could not penetrate the disciples' mindset, how much harder it may be to penetrate my own, or that of our public policy?

And are real dangers in life. As anyone who has fled their home, some of us here.

But it also seems to me we should work on being afraid of the right things, and not the wrong ones. Be afraid of evil. Be afraid of violence, of heartbreak. Be afraid of isolation and division between people, dehumanising labels like 'illegal,' or 'alien'. But do not be afraid of beginning to share. Of beginning to ask one another about our own stories, of believing that we can structure even this society in such a way as to have enough. 12 baskets full leftover.

We can read this text, and recognise ourselves in the disciples hardness of heart, and work on ourselves on what it would be to understand about the loaves. To understand that God's plenty is not about what we have stored up, but what we can marshal and organise to give away. Here's a thing, sharing is contagious. Watch someone offer a seat on the underground – it is almost like then there's a competition sometimes – no you take mine – and to help when it is needed. It makes people feel good, strong, purposeful to help. It catches. It is viral.

Not pie in the sky, magic bread, but practical connections and relationships among people and sharing of burdens and resource such that hospitality is possible. This is what Methodism has always done and God willing, will always do – and we are here! Reach out to someone who is in need just a little – listen to a story from someone newly come to this city. To someone frightened at the changes they see in it.

If we build trust in the loaves, in God's provision, we may find it easier to make the small contributions which together add to a society of sanctuary, of welcome.

I am remembering a man in one of my previous churches, which hosted a nightshelter. The church was very clear it could not get the volunteers, would not be able to sustain it. And it was a struggle. And yet, this one man testified to me his life had changed to have the experience of putting faith into action – faith broken out of his head and heart into his hands, in the basement of a Methodist church. And how surprised he had been to realise how many of the nightshelter guests had jobs – were up and out at 4 am to walk across London to a construction or catering site.

This is what understanding about the loaves is – success is not about not having enough in advance, but knowing that we can take a first step, and that God will honour our steps.

Colin Morris was superintendent minister here, back in the 1970s. And yesterday we put his ashes in the ground and honoured the vision he had for the Gospel. He wrote in a 1968 book, *Confessions of an Ecclesiastical Coward*, about his sense that much of our church theology is ‘..a work of endless qualification, dedicated to showing why we cannot take the words of the Galileean peasant at their face value, or follow his example simply...’

He called Jesus the ‘chaos bringer,’ a description I think those disciples in the boat would have been happy to claim on that journey across the sea, with the storm raging. He was the one who had sent them out onto the lake! Chaos bringer, who then most gracefully, most miraculously exposes the real and durable peace at the heart of things. Who changes direction to come to us, and to invite us to come on just another step with him.

God bless you all, we can understand about the loaves. We can change a mindset of scarcity, of fear and self protection. We can teach each other and encourage each other. And we can honour the hunger that has brought you on the journey today, to this act of worship even if you are not sure of all the answers yet. We can begin.

God bless you and each one of us, in our boats and out of them, soften our hearts, put laughter in our mouths and bread in our hands. Amen.