

SERMON 22 JULY 2018

It was Karl Barth, the towering Protestant theologian of the twentieth century who, as you may remember, said that the preacher should always preach with the newspaper in one hand and the Bible in the other. I have my iPad, not least because the news changes so rapidly these days.

Like you, I expect, I spent much of the first part of this last week, and the days beforehand, watching Donald Trump's visit to Europe and then his meeting with Vladimir Putin. I have listened to commentary and debate and, like many others, wondered where all this is leading. The thing with news these days is that just behind the headline stories there are so many others waiting to grab the limelight. I could spend hours reading off this (iPad). But what about this (Bible). What is the Gospel, the Good News, for us today?

It feels as if we have lost our way in so many respects in the public sphere. It seems that headline-grabbing sound-bytes make more impression than real words of wisdom. Are we also like sheep without a shepherd, as Mark described the crowds that flocked around Jesus? I don't think we would feel ourselves to be among those who, back then, were so overwhelmed with sickness, with poverty and the daily struggle of life under an army of occupation. These people longed for healing and wholeness. They were prepared to walk for miles, carrying their sick loved ones so they could get to Jesus. Mark paints an extraordinary and very moving picture of these people. And, let's note, this story is framed by that of the weary disciples who had just returned from the mission on which Jesus had sent them, also teaching and healing. They had come back exhausted, keen to tell Jesus about it. Jesus knew how tired and hungry they were and wanted to take them off with him to de-brief, to recover. It was not to be, because they were seen getting into the boat and when they got to land again, there were the crowds, waiting for them.

Now we are shown something of the nature of the Gospel, the Good News, because Jesus, we are told, was moved with compassion for them in their need. The word translated as "compassion" here more accurately means "gut churning". In a situation of such overwhelming need Jesus, even in all the exhaustion, doesn't turn aside and get back in the boat. He understood they were like sheep without a shepherd, and so, we are told, he began to teach them many things.

This is important. He didn't just, as we might imagine, start off by healing them of their sicknesses. He taught them about God's way of love, of grace; of the things that could weave them together as they understood their need, as the Epistle to the Ephesians said this morning making of them a new humanity, one people, different but not divided. In their lost-ness and need, just as in ours, in all the struggles to make sense of life when so much would divide them and us, so much exacerbate our physical, mental and emotional stress, what Jesus saw as the first need was to turn people back to God and refocus our direction.

It was after this, in a section that the lectionary passes over, that Mark goes on to tell how evening came and this huge crowd was far from home and hungry. Jesus then fed these 5,000 from the 2 fish and 5 loaves, sitting them down on the green grass to rest. Once again he taught his disciples another message about what God's power of caring could do. Having fed the crowd, he dismissed them and went up the mountain to pray alone, while the disciples set off by boat once more. In the middle of the night Jesus comes to them walking on the water.

The lectionary now picks up the thread again as the boat comes ashore at Gennesaret, a wide area of small villages and farms. Once more people come running, carrying the sick on mats to find him as he moved around the area with his disciples. In a very moving and revealing verse, Mark writes "They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed." Can we imagine it? This wasn't a rabble. They recognised that they were in the presence of something holy. They weren't pushing and shoving. They asked permission: "Can we come close and touch your garment? That's enough for us. That's all we need". And it was enough. They found healing. What an image of these people stretching out their hands so they can just connect up with the hem of Jesus' robe! How poignant that they knew their need could be met so simply! No grand gestures. No words, just a reaching out in faith. It made me think about the book *The Robe*, by Lloyd Douglas, where the story imagines what happened to the Roman soldier who won Jesus' seamless garment by a throw of the dice at the foot of the cross. The power of that robe transformed the lives of those who had begun to look after it with care. It was a compelling read.

Maybe it seems almost like superstition, the way the people placed such power on this. We are used to the way in which people still want to have a real, physical piece of something that connects them to someone they idolise. People will pay exorbitant

amounts at auction sales for some star's garment or for an autograph. We like to have something that connects us. Many of us probably treasure something otherwise worthless because it belonged to a loved one. Somehow these things symbolise love and relationship. But in the gospel, what people found as they touched Jesus' garment was not sentiment but everything they needed for their healing and wholeness. It reminds us of the woman who had the haemorrhage for 12 years and touched the hem of Jesus' garment. Back then we are told that Jesus felt the power go out of him. Today, the power of his compassion, flowed through him into these people whose lives had become lost in the struggles that overwhelmed them – these sheep without a shepherd.

Mark isn't telling a tale of some magical robe. He is telling about the overflowing compassion of God which enfolded all those who came to Jesus. There is a lovely prayer I drew from today which has the words "spread wide the hem of your garment", expressing the yearning that the world might come to know the healing power of God's love and mercy.

There is no less need for this today than there was back then. There is overwhelming hunger, thirst, poverty, homelessness, statelessness, sickness. There is also a sense of lost direction about where we are all heading in the relationships between countries competing for dominance and influence. There is the deep underlying need for our one blue planet's wellbeing, and the survival of so much we now see we have taken for granted. We are all like sheep without a shepherd. But the shepherd is there with a gut churning compassion for all the needy, and with a voice that calls us all to refocus our attention and join in God's never-ending work of restoration and caring.

The Gospel doesn't tell us about unmet hopes or of the triumph of darkness and evil. It tells us of how people's real struggles are addressed, answered and how the yearnings of people's hearts find fulfilment, because that is what Jesus came to do and to teach people his way. Let's listen, and trust once more in God's never-failing goodness, mercy and love.