

The Vine at Home
Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Call to worship

Gracious God, I am open to your Spirit this day.
Change, inspire and uplift me, O God, to be attentive to how you are speaking to me today.
In Jesus name, we bring ourselves to worship, Amen.¹

Hymn - 455 STF – All my hope on God is founded -
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRw8uxyN1Rc>

Opening Prayers

Lord of compassion, we direct our attention to you knowing that you are always attentive towards us. Thank you for your love which sustains us and your grace that restores us.

Forgive us for the ways we have fallen short in our love and grow in us a desire to be more like you. Let your words of grace ring out to us, that when we ask, our sins are forgiven.

Jesus among us, we thank you for your presence and the work of your Spirit within us.
That you promise to be with us and grant that we are never alone.
Thank you for drawing us to you through your love and illuminating our hearts and minds with your truth.

Father over all, the whole of creation witnesses to your great works and rejoices in who you are. You are worthy of our adoration and we join our voices to bring you our praise.
To you belongs all glory and splendour and we magnify your holy name. Amen.²

We say together the Lord's Prayer

Reading Matthew 14:13-21 - Feeding the Five Thousand

¹³ Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." ¹⁷ They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." ¹⁸ And he said, "Bring them here to me." ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken

¹ Call to Worship by Tim Baker

² Opening prayers written by Claire Welch

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pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.³

Reflections on the readings:

Today we hear from Andy Fishburne, a minister in the Isle of Man, and he offers his reflections about this very familiar gospel passage and how we might read it in our times.

The story of the feeding of the five thousand in Matthew 14.13-21 is very well known. Rather than explore the question of whether it was a miracle or not, let's think about this story in relation to two distinct current concerns:

- 1) Coronavirus social distancing, and
- 2) Food waste.

Social distancing

We've all probably had a recent experience of avoiding crowds. Maybe you avoided crowds anyway, but most people have been alone far more often than before during the experience of lockdown and global pandemic. Maybe hearing the story of a crowd of five thousand (actually, that was just the number of men - let's push past that rather sexist crowd measurement technique and assume that the real size was around twenty thousand people: all genders and ages, equally important) makes you shiver, especially as they were passing food around.

My heightened awareness of hygiene and virus spreading since March has caused me to read this story in a new light. I can imagine a photograph of the scene in an angry news headline or Facebook post.

Of course, the situation was different then. They were very different here in February this year, yet alone in Jesus' time. But it made me wonder – what would be different if that act of Jesus' ministry had to comply with social distancing in an outbreak of Coronavirus?

Would Jesus have ignored the need to keep social distancing and held the gathering anyway?

How are you feeling about gatherings and churches services?

May we follow his way.

The scale of the event is astonishing: remember, around 15,000 women and children were there (and men as well). The people, the masses, had a hunger to connect with Jesus and be restored, as well as a physical hunger. And Jesus fulfilled both needs.

If he couldn't minister to them all in one gathering, how would he have managed? I think that the only way would have been to enlist helpers, to create a team, to spread the load. That would require a large group of people to act in his power and authority and do what Jesus would have done: restoring brokenness and feeding the hungry.

³ Bible Text is from New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Maybe they could start a chain; one act of grace empowering the recipient to go and be a channel of grace to someone else.

May we follow his way.

Food waste

This passage in Matthew is unusual in that it gives us quite a lot of numerical facts. These numbers tell us a couple of things.

Firstly, the food was multiplied in an astonishing way. One loaf became a thousand loaves. It wasn't a measly, rationed affair – it was wild and abundant. Everyone had ample. Incidentally, as someone who is allergic to gluten, I wonder if there was a gluten-free provision? Maybe it wasn't an issue then, but if it were to happen today it strikes me as unholy to leave some people out...

Everyone ate and was satisfied that day.

May we follow his way.

Secondly, there was very little waste. It seems that the amount of food provided was spot-on. Plenty, but not excessive. This tells us something about the divine; given that hunger and poverty was rife in that society, to generate surplus food would have been an insult to those who went without that day.

May we follow his way⁴

So today picture yourself as the small child. How will you respond?

Do you keep everything for yourself?

Do you pretend you haven't heard?

Do you dismiss that what you have is so insignificant that it can't be of any use at all?

Or do you say Here I am – May I follow your way.

Reflect on your current situation, your church, the building that you worshipped in, the needs of those around you.

Bring to mind all that you are feeling and thinking about those situation.

Now ask God how you can help?

What is your part to play?

Are you holding back or freely offering?⁵

Prayers of intercession

⁴ Reflection written by Andy Fishburne

⁵ Additional thoughts by Wayne Grewcock

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We take as our refrain for our prayers of intercession the same phrase that Andy Fishburne used in his reflection today – an acknowledgement that as we pray, we seek also to be changed, to be motivated to act.

Let us pray.

God of all grace, we bring you ourselves. We bring you our lives, as they currently are, with all that is broken and wrong, but also much to be grateful for and to celebrate. Use us, O God, to build your kingdom, to seek peace in our world, to build communities of love.

May we follow in your way, O God.

God of all grace, we bring you our churches, caught in this strange ‘in between’ time, as we reflect on the painful experiences of lockdown, and how we can best serve our communities and our world over this summer and into the year ahead. Show us how to create safe spaces, spaces where people can grieve, can find healing, can meet with you and be transformed by your grace.

May we follow in your way, O God.

God of all grace, we bring you our nation, 2020 has been – and will continue to be – a difficult year for us as a country. This year of Coronavirus, but also a year where we have discovered much underlying injustice and pain. We bring to you all who have been working overtime to see us through this time of crisis, and all who will need to work overtime as we seek to rebuild our communities, our economy, our relationships and our livelihoods. We bring you our leaders and all who must face difficult decisions or face up to inadequacies in our systems exposed by the process of lockdown and pandemic. Show us how to be a people of grace.

May we follow in your way, O God.

God of all grace, we pray for our world. As we look out on a global pandemic, and a world in which we have gone backwards in tackling poverty and reaching those most in need during this time of pandemic, which has affected the most vulnerable in our world more than many of us.

As we rebuild, show us how to build a world in which every person’s needs are provided for. A world where every person’s potential is fulfilled.

May we follow in your way, O God.

May I follow in your way, O God.

Show me what is mine to do.

We bring this, and all our prayers, in Jesus’ name, Amen.⁶

Hymn 410 STF Lord your church on earth is seeking
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrYUghRgKOU>

⁶ Prayers of intercession written by Tim Baker
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Blessing

Guide us, great Jehovah, as we seek to respond to your love to us. Help us be a shining example of love in a world crying out in need. May we be Christ's hands and feet, by the power of your Spirit. Amen.⁷

⁷ Blessing written by Tim Baker