

SERMON: Sunday – 18 July 2021 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Brought Near, Rested, Fed and Forgiven. Now Go and Do the Same.

Ephesians 2:11-22

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Shine your light O Lord, in our hearts and in our minds, that we might now your guiding hand, in Word and Spirit, now and always.

In the lectionary reading for this week, the verses chosen from Mark's Gospel don't say much about the feeding of the 5,000. The bulk of that story is covered elsewhere in the three year lectionary cycle.

Instead, in this week's Scripture, comment from Mark's Gospel centres around the fact that when Jesus saw the crowds he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd and so he began to teach them many things (34).

In this way, Jesus fed the crowds, By teaching them. By giving them much needed guidance. Perhaps this is what the lectionary compilers want us to notice, that the teaching of Jesus is the daily bread we need.

And nothing's changed. That's still the case. Christ teaches us and gives us much needed guidance, available to us on a moment by moment basis, from the Good Shepherd who longs to guide us.

For without a shepherd in our lives we are like sheep left to wander. Left to try to work things out on our own. Left to get lost; to stumble, to fall, to be preyed upon and ultimately, to lose our lives.

But of course the good news is that our lives need not be lived without the Good Shepherd to guide them and heal them.

For wherever Jesus went he encountered the sick and healed them (56).

Paul tells the Ephesians that at one time they were separate from Christ but that now they have been brought near by the blood of Christ (13).

This Christ has, through the cross, destroyed the walls of division between God and people, between circumcised and uncircumcised between Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free...

And brought all together in a new humanity, one marked by peace and connected by the same Spirit.

Christ is the cornerstone of this new humanity in which we are being built into that same dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

And wherever the Spirit is there is peace (2 Cor 3:17).

I'm astonished yet again, that Jesus, in the height of his ministry, when we're told everyone was going after him, all were being healed, there was enough work piling up for a whole life time, and what does he say to his followers? We need to double our efforts? We need to work in shifts to get all this healing done and spread the news about the kingdom?

No. He doesn't say any of that.

He says, come away with me and rest.

In so many ways the pandemic has made it difficult to find rest. Working from home, or as someone put it, living at work, juggling home schooling, keeping up with endless Zoom meetings, not to mention trying to keep abreast with the latest Covid guidelines.

But Jesus trusts God so much that he is able, in the midst of all the busyness, to withdraw and rest.

It's ok to rest. It's good to rest. We all need good rest. Especially the rest we were invited into by our Leader and Shepherd.

As one commentator reminded me this week, "the work of the kingdom is God's, we're not indispensable, God will survive our naps, it's ok to rest" (Debbie Thomas).

There's so much more that could be said about rest and peace and how they are interrelated but I want to point to another aspect from today's readings, that of the bringing together of what was previously divided, which I believe flows out from that place of rest we just mentioned, just as Jesus' compassion for others flowed out of his own rest in God.

There are so many stories in the Bible and in our history which testify to the work of reconciliation, of Christ inspired bringing together of those who were formally separated.

It's why forgiveness is such a powerful gift. A gift that comes from Christ Jesus who on the cross destroys the walls of division and prays "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34).

Recently, I was reminded of the story of Eric Sutherland Lomax. That might not be a name familiar to you.

But if you've read the book called *The Railway Man*, or seen the film starring Colin Firth, you might well know the name Eric Lomax.

In fact, Colin Firth wrote about being "overwhelmed by the enormity of the story" when he first read the script and met Eric and his wife in person.

(SLIDE)

Born in Edinburgh in 1919, Eric Lomax left the royal high school to work in the post office before being drafted into the British army, aged 20, as an officer at the beginning of the second world war.

He was captured in 1942 by the Japanese whilst a POW, he was forced to work on the Burma railway.

He and five others were tortured for building a clandestine radio.

After the war he found it difficult to adjust back to civilian life. PTSD wasn't recognised back then. And so he joined the colonial service where he served in Ghana before returning home to work for Scottish Gas and Strathclyde University.

He was the first patient of the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture set up in 1985.

And I'm sure it was this that God used to help Eric get to a place where he was able to seek out and forgive one of his Japanese tormentors, Takashi Nagase in 1998 in Thailand.

The film recounts this in a very moving scene of the two embracing. It must've been such a hard thing to do but he was clearly determined to do it, to make the effort to reach out and forgive.

These sort of acts appear small and insignificant in light of all that's wrong in the world but they are huge for those involved and they are significant acts in the building of that dwelling place for God that Ephesians 2 speaks of. They are Christ inspired acts of love aiming at peace.

I wonder what moves we might make in order to express that same love that the Spirit of God is moving in us, under the Good Shepherd's guidance.

Is there someone we need to forgive?

Is there someone we need to speak to or write to?

Is there something we've left undone for too long and now it's time to address it?

Let's pray,
Good Shepherd,
Healer of all,
Destroyer of dividing walls,
Cornerstone,
Speak into our hearts and minds,
as we rejoice in your goodness and love for us,
and as we respond with hearts open before you.
Help us to have compassion for others, like you.
And help us to forgive,
as we have been forgiven.
In Jesus name.
Amen.