

# Stokesley Methodist Church



**Sunday 2nd August 2020**



## **A Gathering Prayer from the Roots resources**

Mighty God of miracles, we come before you.

We imagine what it might have been like being part of a crowd of 5,000.

We may be worshipping from home but we think about the people in other homes in our town, village, and country, also worshipping you.

Bound together by your great love, we gather in spirit to meet with you, Jesus.

Dear God, you look deep inside us, seeing not only our outer but our inner needs. Have compassion on us, we pray.

Feed us today from your holy word, that we will be filled.

**Amen.**

## **Lectionary Readings:**

**Isaiah 55 v1-5** (p742) Invitation to the Thirsty

**Psalms 145 v8-9, 14-21** (p632) The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love

**Romans 9 v1-5** (p1135) God's Sovereign Choice

**Matthew 14 v13-21** (p981) Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand

## The Hour is Late

This week our focus is on bringing people together & the need to share while there is still time.

In a dramatically political atmosphere, Jesus organises a meal for a multitude in the wilderness as a sign of compassion, and a lesson to the disciples that they need to look around them, see the need and meet it.

The passage from Isaiah is the opening of the joyous climax of the central section of this book: God's exiled people are going home and they need supplies for the journey.

God sounds like a street vendor offering goods for sale. Unlike the empire that has kept the people poor, God offers all they need without them having to hand over money, and the prophet contrasts what the empire offers with what God freely supplies. By the middle of verse 3, it becomes clear that all this talk of bread and milk is just a metaphor of God's faithfulness to his chosen servant, Israel. All this will lead not simply to Israel's liberation, but also through them to the freedom of countless others.

Paul has concluded his complex argument about what God has achieved in Christ. Now he asks, what about 'my own people', Israel? All that is true of them, he has just said is true of those who are in Christ. What is happening? The clue is in verses 2-3. This is

not abstract theology but heartfelt lament. This is Paul channelling the psalmist who cries to God from a place of abandonment (eg Psalm 22) and bewilderment (eg Psalm 77). If what he has said about those who trust in Jesus, whatever their ethnicity, is true, what does this mean for his people Israel who have carried God's promise thus far?

Matthew's account of the feeding of 5,000 begins with Jesus withdrawing on the news of John's death. Is he seeking solace in the wilderness, taking stock of his movement now John has gone, or getting out of Herod's way? Whatever the reason, this story has a profoundly political location, beginning with the empire acting against Jesus' movement, and ending with the feeding of an army in the wilderness. In between these brackets we are treated to a story of compassion in action, of the lavish grace of a God who loves and provides for all.

The crowds followed Jesus, and his response was to meet their needs. The disciples – maybe keen to ensure that they could meet Jesus' need – want to send the crowds away. But Jesus challenges them to meet the crowds' need for food. Rightly the disciples object that they have barely enough for their own needs. So, Jesus feeds the crowds so that the disciples will learn what compassion looks like, just as much as because they all needed an evening meal.

Although the miracle is Jesus' doing, the disciples are invited to play their part by making the seating arrangements, distributing the food and clearing up afterwards. Amazingly, five loaves and two fish had become a banquet for 5,000 men and unnumbered women and children, with more left over for the disciples than they had started with.

Two strong resonances in the story should not be missed. The first is the reminder of how God provided manna in the wilderness.

Matthew does not labour this, but the fact that he describes the place as a wilderness suggests that he has the wanderings of the people under Moses in mind. And the fact that the crowds are looking to Jesus for leadership suggests that they see him as a new Moses. The other resonance is the strong echo of the Eucharist in the language of verse 19b. Of course, no one in the crowds or the disciples would have got this, but we do – because we are reading this story after the Last Supper became the central celebratory meal of the Christian tradition. And with this, there is a strong echo of the messianic banquet of Isaiah chapter 25: here God's people feast in celebration of the coming of his kingdom and their place in it. There is one other echo that is worth noting. The story immediately before this one was set in a lavish banquet presided over by a self-aggrandising empire builder (Herod). Here we have the opposite: another king, generously providing for all those who look to him for guidance and leadership in a kingdom of grace and welcome.

### **The links between the readings**

The Isaiah and Matthew passages both speak of God's people needing provision in the wilderness. In both there is the stirring of liberation, of the coming together of people for the journey on which God will take them. Both stories talk of God's people being freely equipped to meet the needs around them.

### **A Sending Out Prayer**

By the end of the day, the crowds must have been exhausted. They left with full stomachs and full hearts. They had met with Jesus. You feed us daily, Lord, with your wisdom & love, and we go out to live the lives you call us to. May we be conscious of your perfect timing in our lives, as we reach out to the outsiders as well as to our own. Bless us, Lord. **Amen.**