

Mothers' Union Service

Two ways of living

Mark 6 and James 2

Both James and Mark are passages that sit in the back of my mind a lot. Partly because these days, I spend more of my life at banquets than feeding the hungry. Constant tension working where I work – and constant temptation to feel negative and judgemental. I was preparing for this service, today, in the same week as the royal wedding took place. It wasn't a far away event, it wasn't something on TV. I was involved and working there on the day. Difference between celebrities and royalty.

You may think that a royal wedding is far removed from our readings – but not really. You see, the story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 is not an isolated one. It comes as part of a wider story, and straight after another story of a group eating together.

A tale of two banquets

If we had read the whole of the story... We would read of two meals. Two banquets, two feasts, two kings. Yet vastly, vastly different stories.

The first – a banquet at Herod's table. Lavish and earthly. With great food, and a dancing woman, and the gruesome episode of John the Baptist's head being brought out on a platter. Herod had liked listening to John the Baptist, but did not understand him. A king who is unsure of himself makes rash promises he doesn't have the courage to get out of.

Wants to impress, wants to be liked, wants to be seen to be strong. A banquet – behind closed doors. For the select few. The high fliers.

Then with almost no transition, the scene shifts to what we have read. Jesus is with the disciples, they are tired and weary, they have been teaching and caring for others and need some space.

'They had no leisure even to eat' – they were tired, without time for food. Jesus encourages them to look after themselves – but sometimes work catches up with us.

The respite was short – the crowd followed. Another gathering, this one around Jesus. First to listen and to learn.

Jesus did not have to do it – but he had compassion on them, because he saw they were lost...He saw their need. Herod fed his own need for recognition, his own lust, his own ambition. Jesus' attention and compassion are directed to the crowd.

He does not simply look at spiritual needs, but has compassion for the whole person. He keeps teaching and action together, faith and works walk hand in hand in the ministry of Jesus.

Colluding with the world

Little exchange with the disciples late in the day is instructive... Jesus wants the crowd fed, the disciples point out to Jesus this is impossible. This is the man who cause the miraculous catch of fish, who performed healings, who raised the dead and so on. But they do not get it. Tell him to send them away. Powerful message there – eating with someone was an important thing to do. Sending them away would also be a powerful statement. The disciples are horrified at the cost of what Jesus is

suggesting. This is extravagant. This is beyond what any normal person would do. But we know the rest of the story.

Disciples' response – everybody is responsible for themselves, let them look after themselves. Then outrage at thought that they should be asked to help – and incredulity and shock, it is preposterous, impossible, overwhelmed by need.

Equal danger in our two readings: colluding with the power structures of the world as it is. In James, by treating people differently according to their status and wealth. In Mark, refusing to shoulder the responsibility for working with others for justice, and simply seeing others as responsible for their own well-being.

Go and see: take responsibility

Jesus' command to the disciples: 'go and see'. A command repeated in the Gospels. Constantly telling us to see for ourselves. Not just listening, but seeing too. And having to do something, to go/come, to move towards Jesus, to seek after the truth.

'Go and see' – about finding out from the crowd? Parallel text has a boy with two fishes.

Boy had to give up his lunch. Jesus can turn a small act of kindness into something that everyone benefits from.

Extraordinary abundance

Another feast. A simple feast, this one. Sitting outside, a picnic on the lawn. No lavish palace, no silverware. One where all are satisfied, all had

plenty. A feast gathered round another king – one who prays and asks for God's blessing first, rather than try and impress. A king who has compassion on those around him. A feast where all receive and partake of the same food. A feast where all are welcome, with no exceptions. A feast so extravagant that everyone is filled, and then they took up twelve baskets of leftovers. God's provision spilling out, more than what was needed or could be imagined. The crowds are guests at God's table, and God provides.

Now... why tell us those two stories next to each other? I think we are meant to read them together. As the stories of two ways looking at the world. Two ways of being. Something that happens a lot in the Gospels, this juxtaposition of two ways of living.

One, the economy of scarcity. Herod's table. With the appearance of lavishness and extravagance, but in reality a limited feast. A feast that believes it has to be restricted to a favoured few. It is a way of looking at the world that believes resources are in short supply and you cannot have an open table. Or an open door. That not all are equal, that not all deserve to come into the presence of the king.

The other scene tells of a different economy. An economy of abundance, extravagance even. An economy that does not see resources as belonging to individuals and needing protecting, but as belonging to God and needing to be shared. It is an economy of welcome and openness. It is beyond what we conceive of as possible, logical, or even reasonable. It is an economy of justice – because all receive in equal measure, all partake of the same bread. Yet it is not an economy that is reduced the lowest possible medium. It is not simply justice. It is much more. It is abundance, it is generosity. It is a call to live with different sets of beliefs and a different attitude towards the person sitting next to us. Sharing resources, time, and lives. Seeing each person through God's eyes.

Putting those stories together is challenging us to think about our lives and ask ourselves, what do I believe about the world? Do I believe that God's ways are possible in the here and now, or do I believe that we have to be rational and sensible, like the disciples? Do we live in an economy of just deserts, in the belief that what we are blessed with is our own, and others should take care of themselves? Or do we share in God's extravagant grace – so that deserts do not matter?

Word and action: transforming communities

What does 'in Mary Sumner's footsteps' mean? In the context of our readings – it means following the vision for community, it means risk taking by being different, it means enabling change to ripple through a community by effecting small, often hidden acts of kindness (like the boy whose name is not remembered).

MU – demonstrating God's love through faith and action. Exactly what we have in both these passages. Faith that God can do things, faith that little can be turned into much, faith that God can work with the likes of us as he worked with the disciples. But more – statement on website says 'for the transformation of communities'. Again parallel with our text here: what happens if more than just feeding. Both the disciples and the people are transformed. They all learn, they all change. Symbol of meal together – they move from listeners to sharers, community is built through breaking bread together. Detail of the small boy in other readings – this is more than about men, it is about entire communities, and no one is too small or too insignificant to take part.

It is not an easy passage, and it is not an easy call. It is a call to live radically differently, and ask ourselves some very hard, practical questions. It is also a call we enact week after week after week in church, as we share in the Eucharist together. In communion, we all share in one bread, we all share in one cup. We all receive the same, we come equally in God's presence as a people redeemed by grace. Communion calls us not just to receive in silence and considering our relationship with God, our own personal faith, but it is a very radical call to a different way of living, a different way of relating within the family of God. It is a call to see ourselves differently within the world in which we live. It is a call to follow in the footsteps of Jesus – even when, like Herod, we are perplexed by his words, even when, like the disciples, we rebel against the implications of his demands. It is a call to live abundantly out of an experience of being welcome by the God of abundant grace.