

MIRACLE MEAL

→ World Church Sunday, which we celebrate today, presents us with a wonderful opportunity to remember our brothers and sisters in Christ across the world; to rejoice with those who are part of a growing and dynamic Christian church and to weep with those who find themselves persecuted for their faith. This day also gives us an opportunity to remember the immense needs, not just of the churches, but of all God's people in many parts of the world; the need for food, clean water, shelter, medical aid, education and so on. It seems as if what is needed in many parts of the world is a miracle! Only a miracle can change things!

..... This week, those of us that are following the Essential Jesus reading programme will find ourselves reading about some of the miracles that Jesus performed during his earthly ministry and this morning we've heard one of the passages that you'll be reading this week – Matthew's record of the feeding of the five thousand.

→ This story begins with a scene with which most of us will identify very readily. Jesus is keen for some peace and quiet. He's just heard the sad news that his cousin John the Baptist has died in tragic circumstances and he needs some space. Interestingly, this area where Jesus was ministering was pretty densely populated. Galilee was a very small country with lots of villages and small towns, all very close to each other and all with quite a large population, so getting away from people for any length of time was quite an achievement.

.....But his attempts to get some time alone were futile because it isn't long before he's confronted again with the overwhelming task of healing countless sick people who'd followed him and sought him out. And when that job's done and the disciples want to send all the people away Jesus presents them with a challenge to "feed the people." It was a challenge too far for the disciples who found so little food amongst the crowd. But not for Jesus! He takes the bread and fish that is offered, blesses it and then feeds the crowd that has gathered. And there's more than they need! A miracle has happened! Sick people have been healed, hungry people have been fed and the disciples perhaps have had just another glimpse of the power of Jesus, the one they've chosen to follow.

→ But what of us today as we hear this story? What is there for us to learn as we think about it in the context of the needs of our world today and of our own particular situation and circumstances? It must surely be a significant story because it's recorded by all four gospel writers – they all wanted us to know about this event, so where do we start?

.....Well, first of all perhaps this story reminds us that there will always be need around us! Many of us human beings are quite task orientated people – we like to be able to write a list of jobs, tick them off as we complete them and then sit down and put our feet up with a feeling of satisfaction – recognise that! But for most of us life isn't like that at all – when you're raising small children it's one long round of feeding, bathing, changing, washing, tidying up and catching a nap when they're asleep if you're lucky! There's no end to the cycle. When you're a householder, you finish decorating the lounge only to realise that it's made the dining room look shabby which you hadn't really noticed before and so you need to move on to that next. And in many of our occupations, it's rare to leave the desk completely clear of

work on Friday night. There's generally something hanging over until the next week and even if there wasn't when you left on Friday there will be by Monday morning – just look in your e-mail inbox!

.....The need is endless! So, we live for the weekend, or the quiet moment when the baby's asleep, or the dark winter evenings that we think give us an excuse to curl up on the sofa and do little else! We want to shed some responsibility, we want to relax, we want some peace and quiet. And that, I think, is just how Jesus felt at the beginning of this story. He'd had some busy days of ministering to people; he'd just heard the sad news of his cousin's death and he wants some peace and quiet. It was time for a cruise! Well, OK, maybe not quite a cruise, but at least a cruise to the other side of the lake to get away from everyone!

.....But by the time he'd taken his leisurely cruise across the water, people had travelled by land to where they thought he was heading so when he gets out of the boat he's confronted by a crowd of people. What would you have wanted to do then? Get back in the boat and cruise back the other way? Scream at them all to go away and leave you alone? Tell them to come back tomorrow? Any or all of those perhaps? But Matthew tells us that Jesus got out of the boat, felt compassion and concern for these people and healed those that were ill.

..... For Jesus, the need was always there. There were always sick, hurting, lonely, needy people around. There was no end to it and he chose not to run away from that but to show compassion and to make a difference to their lives. And as long as we live in this world there will always be things that continue to vie for our attention too – crying babies, confused teenagers, bulging e-mail inboxes, elderly parents, starving faces from around the world, the child with the JMA collecting box, the need for rest. They're all valid needs and God has entrusted these people and these situations to us, but how do we react?

.....Jesus was wise to try and get away; to refocus before everything overwhelmed him. But when the need was in front of him, he didn't declare himself too tired or too busy but he turned his compassion into positive action. You see we can choose how we will respond. Things can seem overwhelming at times when we look at the needs around us within our own families and in the wider world but that simply sets the stage for our response!

→ And what is that response? Do we look at the vast needs of the hungry and homeless in the world and simply not know where to start? Do we think about the persecuted Christians in some parts of our world and block them out of our minds because we don't know what to do? Do we look at the bulging inbox and in tray and take a day off sick hoping someone else might sort it out? Do we shout "I can't do this anymore!" when the children or our partners are just too demanding?

.....That's pretty much what the disciples did. They'd watched how Jesus responded and then when they got their chance to shine, they blew it! Instead of showing compassion or dealing with the issue they simply suggest that Jesus should send this crowd of people away because it's late and they'll be getting hungry.

..... But Jesus isn't having any of that. "You feed them!" he says to the disciples. Who's he kidding! 5000 men, never mind the women and children besides! Feed them? What with? We've only got five loaves and two fish! That's nothing like enough. And isn't that just how we feel when confronted with the big problems in our

lives and in our world. We can't do anything about this. We don't have enough money, enough energy, enough clout with the authorities!

.....But the trouble is that so often we make our assessment of the situation without taking Jesus into account. We look at what's in our hands; at the resources we have available to us and we immediately think we can't cope; that we can't match the need and therefore that we can't do anything. But notice what Jesus asks next! "Bring them to me" he says. "Bring what you have and let's see what happens!"

.....When faced with difficulties in our own lives or in our own church or in our own community or even in the wider world as we are particularly remembering today, let's not measure what it might be possible for us to do by the size of the resources that we can immediately see. And let's not forget to bring Jesus into the equation because he is a miracle worker. His presence in the situation changes things!

→ God is the source of all the good things; all the blessings in our lives. Jesus took the loaves and fish and he blessed them and he broke them and he gave them to the disciples and the disciples gave them to the people and everyone was fed. As the disciples did what Jesus asked them to do, as they worked with him, the miracle happened and the people were fed because as it says in Luke 1 v 37, "nothing is impossible with God."

.....But of course, the story doesn't end there! Not only did Jesus do what the disciples thought was absolutely impossible, but he managed to have twelve baskets of food left over as well! The disciples had looked at the scale of the problem and been overwhelmed by it. They had looked at what resources they had and thought they could do nothing with them. They had also greatly underestimated the miracle working power of Jesus.

..... Is that what we do too? There's no point hoping and praying that somehow all the needs around us are going to disappear or that someone else will do something about it. There will always be a need and we are all called to respond to that need. Today as we particularly remember our brothers and sisters across the world, as we think of those in the Christian church across the world, as we recognise the huge difficulties that they face, what will we do? Will we behave like those disciples and effectively send them away hoping that someone else will deal with the problem? Or will we offer what we have into God's hands, believing that he can bless it, use it and make amazing things happen with it? Will you pray, will you partner up with one of our JMA collectors, will you support what we are doing to change things for people in Cameroon and Mali through the work of MRDF?

.....The miracle stories that many of you will read this week in the Essential Jesus programme will remind you that Jesus cared about people's needs and people's feelings and he used his power to help change things for them. We are called to be part of that story. We are called to believe in the amazing power of our God, to entrust him with what we have and to allow him to use it. And remember that just as Jesus cared about the hunger of the huge crowd of the people on the hillside that day, so he cares about the needs that you have and he can change things for you too if you will simply place your trust in him as countless people around our world are doing today.