

Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!

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Sunday 27th September 2020 – Harvest

Introduction

Hello and welcome to this podcast. My name is Robin Allison and I am the Minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton: Chalmers Memorial Church.

During this past week at Chalmers Church we held the second of our midweek services in our Church Hall. We're running these as a way of helping to gently ease folk back into the routine of getting back to Church after an absence of six months. Our earnest hope is that it's only a short time until we re-open on a Sunday too. In the meantime, however, if you want to come to one of our Wednesday services all you need to do is to contact me at the manse – either by phone or by email - and I'll be happy to book you a place. These services are going well and the procedures we've put in place to ensure social distancing and cleanliness are holding up well too. You are more than welcome to join us, if you can.

Our Podcast this week, however, turns its attention in a different direction – to the theme of Harvest. At this time of year many churches around the country would be marking their Harvest festivals, and we would have been doing the same in Chalmers Church this Sunday too. In more normal times we'd have come to worship in a building beautifully adorned with symbols of both the farming and fishing industries – ploughs, a water fountain, fishing nets and baskets... all a powerful reminder of our reliance on the abundance of the earth and sea, on God's creation.

Our Harvest thoughts this year will be, of necessity, very different from previous years. However, even although our focus in these recent months has been on a global pandemic, the work of the farmer and the fisherman has continued. We're as reliant, even in these days, as we ever were, upon their work and on the abundance of God's goodness to us in the world of creation.

We come to remember the God who is abundant in his grace as the hymn writer reminds us in the famous Harvest hymn:

We plough the fields and scatter
the good seed on the land,
but it is fed and watered
by God's almighty hand.
He sends the snow in winter,
the warmth to swell the grain,
the breezes and the sunshine
and soft refreshing rain.

*All good gifts around us
are sent from heaven above,
then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord
for all his love.*

In a few moments we are going to take a look at one of the greatest of Jesus' miracles – the feeding of the five thousand, the day that Jesus takes so little of the produce of the earth and makes it to be so much.

We'll come to that in a moment, though. First of all, let us pray?

Opening prayer and Lord's Prayer

Lord of life, we enter into your presence this day so that we can praise you and in so doing we recognise that you are the creator of the heavens and the earth. We thank you for the way in which you are so faithful to us – bringing season after season, day after day.

Day by day, year by year we see your mighty hand at work and so we marvel at the beauty of your design and rejoice in all that you have given us.

We praise you for this vast and awesome universe in which you have placed us, the world in which we live which has given us an abundance of reasons to count our own personal blessings.

And we thank you for the harvest of the earth which sustains our daily needs - for the many places from which it has come, for the toil and effort which made it possible and for your hand which ultimately lies behind it all.

Yet Father, though we thank you we admit that we do not always treat your world in a fair way.

We have allowed it to become messy and polluted. We have watched many go hungry and then wondered what we can do - so enormous does the task of meeting their needs seem.

We confess that we have stood back whilst there are some who are lonely.

And we confess too that we have not always shared the generosity of your grace and the blessings of the earth.

Generous God, who provides all that we need - and more - help us through our worship this day help us to be generous in turn with what we have and who we are.

And help us also to know how precious is the world in which we live.

As we bring this prayer to you in the words which Jesus has taught us to say and pray together saying...

*Our Father
who art in heaven
Hallowed be thy name
Thy kingdom come
Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil
For thine is the kingdom, and the power
and the glory, for ever, Amen.*

Bible Reading – John chapter 6 verses 1 to 15

Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), 2 and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the signs he had

performed by healing those who were ill. 3 Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. 4 The Jewish Passover Festival was near.

5 When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming towards him, he said to Philip, 'Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?' 6 He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do.

7 Philip answered him, 'It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!'

8 Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, 9 'Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?'

10 Jesus said, 'Make the people sit down.' There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). 11 Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish.

12 When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, 'Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.' 13 So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

14 After the people saw the sign Jesus performed, they began to say, 'Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.' 15 Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

Amen and thanks be to God for this reading of His Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.

Reflection

Surely all of this had nothing to do with Jesus... How on earth could he feel a sense of responsibility for the mass gathering on that hillside when he hadn't even issued them with an invite in the first place?

After all, at verse 1 of our bible reading from John chapter 6, all we are told is that Jesus crosses to the far shore of the sea of Galilee followed immediately, at verse 2, by the declaration that a great crowd started to assemble.

No – Jesus hadn't really invited them to be there. Instead, what got them to start gathering was *"because (as we read at verse 2) they saw the signs he had performed by healing the sick"*.

Watching Jesus do these amazing things had created an almost gravitational pull for these people... The trouble was that in their haste to follow him that they had forgotten some basic principles – the sort of small acts of preparation that any person who has ever planned a journey would implement without even thinking, including bringing some food to eat.

That's a lesson that many a parent has learnt over the years when it comes to planning a journey with small children, and one I remember only too well as my own kids grew up. You might have planned to stop at a motorway café at some point but it always helps if there's enough food in the car to keep folk going until the next stop... and it's cheaper too because motorway café shops are always more expensive to buy bags of sweeties and crisps!

Not that such places existed in Jesus' day – but I am sure you get the idea. If you're going to be away for a period of time, especially when you don't know how long that time will be, it's better to plan ahead.

It wasn't just the crowd that hadn't planned ahead. It seems that neither had the disciples of Jesus much of a clue either about what to do as they faced the dilemma of what to do with this ever expanding crowd... and we'll come back to that in a moment.

Before we get to that point in the story, however, it's worth spending just a few moments in setting the scene for how the gospel writer, John, recounts this particular miraculous event.

This miracle is recounted in all four of the gospels so we can assume that all of the gospel writers saw this particular miracle as of especial importance. Like any writer recounting events you've got to spend time deciding on which part of the story that is left in and which one gets put out. Not so in this case of this story, however.

The other three gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – all tell the story in a seemingly more straightforward way. In their versions of the miracle, Jesus' actions seemed more clearly motivated by a sense of compassion for these people. Matthew, for example, specifically speaks of the compassion that Jesus felt when he saw the vast crowd. Something in him sensed the need to do something for them, leading him initially to go amongst them healing the sick.

Now it's not that John's version of the story would rule out the compassion of Jesus... It's simply that the way he introduces the story is different, specifically at verse 4 when he mentions – seemingly out of the blue – that the “*Jewish Passover festival was near*”.

Only John mentions this and, as I said, it comes “*out of the blue*” ... Or was it?

It's all tied up with John's way of telling us who Jesus is and it's got something to do with the Passover.

We all know the story of the first Passover – the night before the Hebrews were about to be set free from slavery in Egypt... the night when they were to share one last meal in their Egyptian homes... a meal composed of unleavened bread and bitter herbs and, of course, the sacrificial lamb... each part of the meal symbolising the journey they had been through and the journey they were about to begin.

John has already picked up on this at John chapter 1 and verse 27 where Jesus comes to John the Baptist for baptism and John's first words are, “*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*”

And here is the lamb of God just about to lay out before all of these people a meal... a meal fit for the kingdom of God.

This was no Passover meal, to be sure – at least not in the specific sense, but it is a meal... and this is a large crowd of very needy people... and Jesus, the lamb of God, was just about to break bread with them.

No wonder John picks up this powerful imagery. Jesus has compassion on them – yes. But he has compassion on them because he is their saviour – he is the “*Lamb of God*” who will lay down his life for them.

Maybe some would say that John overcomplicates things here. Isn't this just a matter of someone responding to the needs of others?

Isn't Jesus just doing what thousands of people during these recent months have done as they cook food... deliver meals... make phone calls... go shopping... collecting prescriptions – and doing so simply and willingly without any need to overcomplicate matters.

Doing stuff like that, after all, is just about being human and when we see need, we respond – or at least that's the theory...

John, however, cannot help but see Jesus' life in that larger context, the context of why God sent his son into the world in the first place – to bring God's people back to him...

And its why Jesus, as I queried at the outset of these thoughts, saw it as his responsibility to do something about what he saw. He could not turn his back on these people, even if the disciples were convinced that it was all too much for them.

When he is quizzed by Jesus as to how they should get bread for these people, Philip panics. There is no way that they have the resources to feed them all, nor the money.

First rule of mass catering – don't overpromise on that which you don't know you'll be able to produce.

I learnt this principle when I worked at a hotel during the summer recess from University many years ago. The hotel only had 25 rooms so we often doubled up our roles – carrying luggage, cleaning, doing a shift behind the bar and serving afternoon teas.

There were no chefs on when afternoon tea was being served but they did leave all the stuff we would need – bread, fillings, scones, jams... everything we'd need until, that is, one quiet afternoon when there was nothing much doing that a bus tour turns up unannounced with the bus driver asking if we could do 40 afternoon teas!

Being full of bravado my colleague and I said that "*would be fine!*". The only problem was that we should have really got the duty manager to come and deal with the request because for the rest of that afternoon he and Philip in our story had a lot in common as he muttered under his breath that we shouldn't have agreed to so many folk without asking him...

We got there, in the end of the day... We survived although there wasn't exactly 12 basketfuls left over, if I am being honest... In fact, there was nothing left and so we also got it in the neck from the chef too about all the prep that they'd now have to do for the next day. And here was us thinking that we were simply making a bit of money for the hotel on an otherwise quiet day!

Looking back, I am not so sure that I feel so remorseful anymore about our decision to accommodate that bus load of tourists after all, if we hadn't taken them someone else would have...

And reflecting on why Jesus would have bothered to have been bothered by a crowd that he did not ask to gather there in the first place – well, it simply wasn't in Jesus way of doing things to pass the so called "*buck*" to someone else. The need was there, and it needed to be addressed.

And if Jesus walked our streets and cities today – as we think about the generosity of the harvest – I doubt that he would have looked the other direction either.

That there are people who are hungry would have bothered him now - just as it did then.

That we had the resources to do something about it – even two fish and five loaves – and couldn't find a way to share it with others... well, that would have bothered him too because Jesus, the lamb of God was filled with compassion for his people.

Amen and thanks be to God for this reflection on his Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.

Closing Prayer

Although we're not – as you listen to or read this podcast – in the same place of worship I wonder if you'd join in some responses as we come to our closing prayer. When I say the words "Lord in your mercy" would you respond with the words "Hear our prayer".

Our loving heavenly Father, before we draw this time of worship to a close, we want to spend a few moments praying for the wonder of your world and for those who steward the resources within it. We pray for those whose lives are caught up with your creation, and who work with you in tending and nurturing it - for farmer and fisherman who, in these challenging days, reap the harvest of earth and sea. At this time, we are particularly conscious of those who have a concern for their future work but who still aspire to serve your people and the people of their local communities. May they know your presence and be conscious of the care that you offer and through both your presence and your care may they find hope for their future.

*Lord in your mercy **Hear our prayer***

We pray for the hungry and the homeless – those denied the resources that we take for granted. We pray for those who help the vulnerable particularly the work of the Foodbanks in our own land and aid agencies around the world. And as we do so, we pray for those who are helped that they will feel sustained and enriched by the support that they receive.

*Lord, in your mercy **Hear our prayer***

We pray for the struggling and the oppressed, for those without the power to negotiate or bargain; for all whose work goes unrewarded, and whose produce is undervalued.

*Lord, in your mercy **Hear our prayer.***

We pray for a responsible stewardship in our use of your world; for sustainable consumption as well as production; for care for the creation as well as a deep compassion for each other.

*Lord, in your mercy **Hear our prayer***

And, finally, we pray for retailers and suppliers and for all involved in the processing and transporting of food as we recognise that such roles and responsibilities are not easy to carry out with the hours of work often being long and challenging,.

*Lord, in your mercy, **Hear our prayer***

Lord God of the Harvest, we thank you for the richness of your world and ask you to bless all for whom we have prayed this day in Jesus' name, Amen.

Benediction

May God who clothes the lilies and feeds the birds of the air, who leads the lambs to their pasture and the deer to still waters, who multiplied the loaves and fishes and changed water into wine, lead us, feed us, multiply us, and change us to reflect the glory of our Creator now and through all eternity.

And the blessing of God almighty - the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit - rest upon you and remain with you now and for ever, Amen