

TJW, HT, 9.8.09, 9.15am & 11am, Matthew 15.29-39

Something that we sometimes do in this church is to give Christians the chance to stand up and say how they've experienced God at work in their own lives.

In any good family people like to share their news and their joys with each other. That's no different in the church family, and it's a huge encouragement to each other.

We need to keep reminding each other that God is real - that he's alive - that he wants to be and can be right at the centre of our lives. Jesus once said: "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." When we're aware that he's keeping that promise right now for us, we should tell each other.

So at the end of this sermon there'll be opportunity for a few Christians who want to, to come to the front and tell everyone else of some way in which you've experienced for yourself the truth of what I'm going to proclaim from the Bible in this sermon.

Just to say, especially if you're a visitor - no one's going to pick on you - this will be a chance for regular members of the church family to say something, if they'd like to. And it won't drag on and on, because this is just a normal-length service, and we've got a BBQ to get started!

But it often helps people who are not yet committed Christians to hear not just from preachers like me, but from different kinds of Christians, who can testify for themselves that what God says to us in the Bible is actually true and real, and stands the test of ordinary, real lives like ours.

Now this morning we're looking at a part of God's Word that portrays for us what Jesus Christ is like.

If my wife wanted to portray to you what I'm like - what my character is - she'd probably tell you stories of the kinds of things I do - some of them funny, many of them embarrassing, (so please don't ask her afterwards).

And so the Gospels in the New Testament are full of stories of what Jesus said and did - and they're there to portray to us the character of Jesus Christ - who he is, what he's like.

Now already at this point there may well be someone here who just wants to let that thought sink into them.

If you did a quick survey on Castle St one Saturday morning, stopping people and asking them who they think Jesus Christ was, most people would say something like, "the founder of Christianity", or "the Son of God", or "a religious figure from history", or "that bloke who was born in a stable at Christmas".

All those answers are true as far as they go - but do you see that they all put Jesus a bit 'out there' - away from us, back in history - or separate from us and up there with God.

But in the Bible God constantly wants to draw Jesus Christ close to us - to show us that he's a person, with a character - someone to relate to, to get to know.

There's all the difference in the world, isn't there, between having an idea of your perfect partner in your mind - and then actually meeting a real person and starting to share the rest of your life with them.

And there's all the difference in the world between having an idea of Jesus in your mind, and actually encountering him, in your own life, in his own words in the pages of the Bible.

So let's get to the Bible, and you might like to have in front of you the passage that was read for us - Matthew chapter 15, under that heading, 'Jesus feeds the four thousand'.

Let me tell you straight away the two big things God tells us here about Jesus: He is compassionate. And he provides.

Or you could put it this way: He has pity. And he has power. Even to say that much is a pretty rare combination in one person.

So, first: **Jesus is compassionate**.

Let's see that together, as I read from verse 29 of Matthew chapter 15 [READ verses 29-32].

He has compassion on the lame, the blind, the crippled and the mute
- compassion enough to heal them.

He's out in the open country by what's called the Sea of Galilee, which is a large lake in the middle of Israel, and a huge crowd have come out to him - maybe around 10,000, because it says that there were 4,000 men - let alone the women and children.

And they'd stayed with him for three days - can you imagine someone with a power and a charisma who would keep you out there with him in the open for that long?

Last week I spent one night camping out in a tent in the garden with my young son. He was very excited about it. By the time I woke up, I was cold and uncomfortable. One night was enough for me.

But Jesus had such an effect on this crowd that they stayed out in the open with him for three days.

But now they've got nothing left to eat, and again Jesus has compassion on them, and by a miracle he feeds them.

This is a simple point, really. Do you relate to Jesus as someone whose heart is full of compassion for you?

When you think of him, is he real enough to you to be someone who is compassionate even to you?

Or have you always thought of him as someone who is more distant and colourless than that?

You see, Christ has come because he is God in human form, who wants to engage with our lives and our hurts.

If you wouldn't call yourself a committed Christian, can I say to you that right here you see what's at the heart of Christian faith.

It's not a religious philosophy, or a manual of good behaviour.

It's not a general sense that God exists and that there's life beyond death.

No - at heart it is God, come to us in the form of a human being, wanting to bring his life, his reality, his character - and therefore his compassion - into our lives - so that we're no longer outside of God, heading for eternity without him - but so that we're united with God, actually living with him as our God, rather than just saying in our minds that we believe in him.

I can remember one person telling me that they only realised this after three decades of regular church-going, and they began to relate personally to Jesus Christ.

Christianity is relationship with God, through Jesus - or it's nothing.

I'm telling you this so that no one will go away this morning thinking you're a Christian if really you're not. And I'm telling you this, if you're not a committed Christian, to help you search after God in the place where you'll really find him - in Jesus.

But it's also true that Christians need to keep opening themselves to the compassion of Christ.

I happened to see an old music video this week - it was for the song "Everybody Hurts", by the band REM. As the song plays, the camera pans slowly along the faces of people who are sitting in their cars going nowhere, because they're stuck in a traffic jam. As each person comes into the frame, a caption appears, showing you their thoughts: "She's going to leave me." "I don't know what to say." And the refrain goes on: "Everybody hurts" - however private we keep it.

But, you see, the definition of a Christian is someone who has made Jesus 'Lord' of every part of life. We need to open even the dark corners up to his compassion.

But we're perverse people, and often we don't like to do that.

If I hang on to my past hurts, that's my excuse for staying stuck the way I am - maybe: not wanting to trust anyone now - not wanting to change my destructive attitudes, because I get a weird kind of pleasure out of them.

A Christian knows that if they begin to open those hurts up to Christ's compassion, then his character and his life are getting to work in them, and he'll begin to root stuff out. And sometimes, in our foolish pride, we'd rather live in our darkness than in his light.

You see, whether you're a Christian or whether you're not, Christ won't force his compassion on you. He offers it - but you have to receive it and relate back to him.

Jesus is compassionate. But he doesn't just have pity. He also has power. And here we see, too, that **Jesus provides.**

First of all, he provides for these people physically, and practically.

From verse 29, he heals them - he makes the blind see and the lame walk.

And then, from verse 33, he feeds them. He turns seven loaves of bread and a few fish into a meal that feeds a few thousand.

He promises practical provision to everyone.

Whether you know Christ personally or not, every good thing you have comes from him.

If you treasure your family, they're a sign of his goodness to you.

I often hear new parents say that having their first child made them think seriously of getting God at the centre of their lives - because the child seems to be such a great gift to them.

Christ's practical provision extends to our money.

A member of the church family was talking to me this week about Christian giving - about how she'd learned in the past that Christian giving was not just a few pounds here and there but for the Christian should mean giving significant chunks of our income - and yet she still found that God provided all she needed.

But there's more going on in this healing than just practical provision.

In the context of the Bible, this miraculous physical feeding is showing us that Jesus is the only one who will satisfy your spiritual hunger.

You see, throughout the Bible, being invited to a great banquet, where everything is provided for you, is an image of being a child of God, and being with him for eternity.

If you want to see one example of that, turn back four pages to chapter 8 of Matthew, verse 10 [READ verses 10-11].

And you could think also of way back in the Old Testament, when God's people were wandering in the desert and running out of food - and God sent manna - that food that tasted like honey and appeared for them on the ground every morning.

This feeding of the four thousand is like a repeat of that - God provides a feast in the wilderness, to remind people that he alone can satisfy them spiritually.

I don't know how your spiritual hunger shows itself, or what you do to feed it.

Do you try and ignore it and fill your life with other things?

Of course this hunger in us will only be satisfied by a relationship with the God who made us.

And there's one other key thing that this miraculous feeding shows us.

Jesus' provision is for absolutely everyone.

Back in Matthew chapter 15 - do you see, that there's just been a feeding of the five thousand. And then, a page or so later, an almost identical feeding of the four thousand?

Why did Jesus need to do it twice? Well, there's one big difference between them. The five thousand who were fed were Jewish people - the people who Jesus had come to be the Messiah for.

The four thousand who were fed, a little later, were not Jews - the description of the location in the story tells us that.

They symbolise the rest of the world. They tell you that, right from the beginning, the spiritual provision that Jesus brings has been on offer to the whole world.

What's the key thing here for the Christian?

Aim to be like verse 37 - do you see what it says about the crowd?

"They all ate and were satisfied."

Can you tell yourself every day: "With Christ, I am satisfied"? "In Christ is all I need." If you really believed that, what troubles do you feel, that might not weigh so heavily? What desires that drive you mad would start to fade?

And for someone who's not yet a Christian?

Let me put the key message in this way: being a Christian, knowing you're going to heaven, is not like paying your money and getting your entry-ticket.

It's like being invited free of charge to the best banquet ever - a banquet you never thought you'd deserve to go to - and finding yourself satisfied more than you could ever have believed.

There are plenty of compassionate people in this world. And there are plenty of powerful people in this world.

But no one combines the two as wonderfully as Christ.

He is compassionate. And he provides. Even when we're in the wilderness, as that crowd were, out by the Sea of Galilee, he is all we need.