

## **Sermon for Sunday 21 July 2024 – The Eighth Sunday after Trinity**

**Revd Graham Naylor, Assistant Priest**

***Jeremiah 23.1-6; Psalm 23; Ephesians 2.11-22; Mark 6.30-34,53-56***

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. I apologise for my voice this morning. Yesterday I came out of retirement, was doing sound at the music festival. It was a bit loud and I was shouting at crew, not because I was unhappy with them, but just to make myself heard. And I'm suffering a bit this morning.

I'm going to give you a little bit of an insight; what happens in the clergy study as we prepare, and I don't know whether, Simon, you may have a different experience to me, but I look at the readings for a given week, hopefully a little bit in advance, and some ideas start to form. I don't tend to put the first bits down on paper, but if you imagine a spider diagram, that's what is going on in my mind. And then we filter them down and we come to the thing that we want to talk about, or we believe we're being called to preach and teach, to proclaim.

As I looked at the readings for this week, I thought, oh, great. There's a lot of material here, a lot of material that I've lived with, yes, for my Christian life, but particularly the last six months in college. And we could have looked at Jesus being compassionate on the crowds when he saw them. We could have delved back into the Old Testament and seen the Lord who is compassionate. Psalm 103 says, 'As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear or who honour him.' That would probably be a good sermon; it could have touched on God revealing himself, his nature, to Moses in Exodus 34; the Lord, the Lord, a God who is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love to the thousandth generation. Or we could have looked at Jesus seeing the people, like a people without a shepherd, wandering aimlessly. And we could have delved into that reading from Jeremiah about the bad shepherds. Ezekiel 34. Simon, isn't that always a scary one for clergy? Woe to the bad shepherds who've not fed the sheep. Oh, dear. Yeah.

We could have looked at Jesus being the new David, the good shepherd, who's prophesied in that Jeremiah reading, and also Ezekiel 34. We could have looked at what it is to tend and feed the sheep of God's flock, to teach them, to build them up in their faith. We could have looked at the Ephesians reading with Jew and Gentile, being brought into the family of God as one people, as is my want at the moment, I could have focused on Temple being the community of believers where God's spirit could dwell.

But, as I'm preparing and thinking, oh yes, I've got this and I've got that, it'd be great to just share what I've been learning for the last six months. I heard the Holy Spirit speak to me and said, that's all well and good, that's all preparation, that's all background; I want you to speak on one verse and one point only. And that's the very first bit of our reading from Mark's gospel. You may want to turn to it. 'The apostles gathered around Jesus and told him all they had done and taught.' What? They gathered around Jesus and told him what they'd been doing. What have they been doing?

Again, another reason, if you have a Bible, to bring it to Church. Even though we have the pew sheets with the readings, bring it to Church. You can have a look at what's either side of the readings. Quick summary; the beginning of John 6. The disciples are sent out; here, they've returned, and in between we had what we heard last week, the beheading of John the Baptist. Okay?

Anybody want points? Points mean prizes. What do we call it when we've got a bit of a story? Then there's another story and we come back to the original story. A sandwich. A Marcan sandwich. Great. But what we've got here in John 6 is we have almost a Marcan club sandwich - multilayered. The disciples are sent out, got John the Baptist being beheaded and the disciples return. Then we have the crowds, a bit of travel and Jesus teaching, and then our lectionary readings chopped a whole bit out, and we're going to come to that in the next few weeks; actually, from John's gospel, the feeding of the 5000, a bit more travel across the lake of Galilee, walking on water; and then we come back to the travel and the healing that we had at the end of our reading; there's a whole bit been chopped out. So we've got this Marcan sandwich of things going on.

We pick up with, if you like, the second bit of bread of the first Marcan sandwich. The disciples have been sent out; we've then had the jam of John the Baptist beheading, if you can describe that as sweet jam. And then they've returned. The apostles gathered around Jesus and told him what they had done and taught.

My friend Tracy, Reverend Tracy James; Tracy, if you're listening to this online, you get a mention! She's the rector over at Needham Market; we were curates together; and she was once asked very seriously, what's your favourite bit of the Sunday morning service? And her quick reply was, 'The end.' Yeah. She didn't mean that it had finished and it was coffee. What she meant was, the best bit for me at the service is having come in, is being sent out, as we say at the end of the Eucharist service, 'To go in peace to love and serve the Lord.' Itching to go out and do that. Itching to go out to do what Jesus had told the apostles to do, the first bit of the bread in the Marcan sandwich. They were sent out, they went out, and proclaimed that all should repent; they cast out demons, anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. What were they doing? They were demonstrating the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It occurred to me that in our service, Sunday by Sunday, we do many things, but one thing we don't do is come back and say what we've been involved in as a result of our going out the previous week. Unless I've missed something; have I missed something in the service? At the end of the service, 'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord', or variations on that theme; we come back, we don't say anything about it. I wonder if this morning Simon and I quickly modified the service and had a little slot and said, 'Come tell us, you were sent out last week, what's been going on this week? What can you report of working in partnership with God to see the gospel proclaimed?'

Bishop John Perumbalath, who was a suffragan bishop in the Chelmsford diocese and is now bishop of a wonderful place, Liverpool. The first time I met Bishop John, it was a week after his consecration, and he stood up at the Bradwell gathering, the open air gathering, and said, I've been given a title that if I hadn't

have been so busy this week, I would have rejected and asked for it to be changed. Now, the moment a bishop, the first time he's speaking publicly in his new role, drops a bombshell like that, I like him. His title was 'being missionary disciples'. He said the reason that he would reject the title is the word missionary is redundant. If you're being missionary, you're being a disciple. If you're not being missionary, you're not being a disciple. So he went on to speak about being disciples, who do mission. But I wonder what would happen, and I'm posing a lot of questions and not many answers this morning, I wonder what impact we might have for the gospel if, Sunday by Sunday, we came in with an expectation of going out. That our 'coming in' is, yes, it's about worship, it's about celebrating the eucharist, it's being taught, but our 'coming in' is about being equipped for the work of service.

Ephesians 4 tells us that the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and the teachers, are given to the church. Those who are set aside for those roles, be they lay or ordained; people like Simon and I, believe it or not, despite what you may think sometimes, we're God's gift to you. We are given to you, the church; not so that we can run around proclaiming the gospel and doing all the work of ministry, but we're given to equip you to do it, brothers and sisters. We are given to equip the saints for the work of ministry. And what if, Sunday by Sunday, we all came, ourselves included, with an expectation that, yes, we'll come to worship, yes, we will come and say a confession and receive absolution, we'll do all the things that we normally do, but we came with an expectation of being built up and equipped in our faith to go out and proclaim the gospel and maybe come back Sunday by Sunday, and say, 'this is what's been happening'.

I said yesterday I was at a music festival. I wasn't wearing my dog collar, but I've worked with the organisers of that music festival since it started back in 2017, which was before I started training for ordination. So they call me 'The Rev', and on my all-access-areas pass around my neck, they put 'The Rev', and I was backstage with one of the bands, and there'd been some conversation going on, apparently, unknown to me, and this person said to me, 'You a vicar?' 'Oh, no, no, I'm curate, but yes, I'm an ordained priest in the Church of England.' 'What are you doing, then?' 'Oh, that's a long story.' 'But what do you do now?' 'Well, talk about what God's done for us.'

'How can you believe in a God of love when the world is suffering?' 'Oh, well, there's a long answer to that, but...' And I got an opportunity which I was able to take, and sometimes I miss the opportunities, but yesterday, I was just able, in just a few moments, proclaim the gospel in a very simple way; just what I call 'gossiping the gospel'. Not academic, not big preaching, sermons, just drop in, that my experience is that God is a God of love. What if we could do that day to day? What if we went out and fulfilled the great commission? This is Matthew; 'The disciples meet Jesus in Galilee, after the resurrection; they worshipped him. Jesus said to them, all authority in heaven and earth is given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I'm with you to the end of the age.

When we prayed with the choir before the service, Simon prayed, and part of his prayer was about recognising the crowds that followed Jesus. Brothers and sisters, if we come in expecting to go out, maybe we'll see the crowds, maybe only a small crowd coming to meet with Jesus. Amen.