

Whilst it is natural and correct to focus on Jesus, as Mark does throughout his gospel, we should not forget the disciples and the crowds because without them today's story is incomplete.

The start of today's reading immediately follows on after the return of the disciples from their first independent missionary trip around the countryside, having been sent out by Jesus, as Revd Jon reminded us of two weeks ago, to preach, anoint and heal sick people and drive out demons.

They have done what was expected of them to the best of their ability and have returned tired - but rest is denied them as it is very busy with crowds of people as Mark puts it, coming and going. So, Jesus takes them by boat to seek out a quiet place where they can rest up and re-charge their physical and spiritual batteries. Fat chance!

Instead, they come ashore only to face another, much larger crowd, eager to meet Jesus. Jesus looks at the crowd and we are told he is moved to show compassion. Jesus has been acting compassionately towards his disciples by taking them to a quiet place but his concern for his disciples now seems to take second place to the greater perceived need of the large crowd. A crowd which Mark tells us numbered 5000 and all are miraculously fed at the end of a day of teaching. You know the story well.

And of course, Jesus ropes in the tired disciples to help distribute the multiplied five loaves and two fishes and what's more he even gets them to collect twelve large basketfuls of left- over bread and fish.

As night draws near Jesus sends his disciples on ahead by boat to what they hoped would be a quiet place to rest up, whilst he goes up the mountainside, alone, to pray.

But what should have been a simple straightforward boat ride turns into a spine-tingling roller coaster of a journey as first, they struggle to make headway against the gale force wind; then shout out in fear as they see what they think is a ghost walking on the water towards them only to be amazed when Jesus climbs into the boat with them and stills the wind before they come to land at Gennesaret.

And on landing, instead of arriving at a place where they can find rest, Jesus is recognised and people start to rush up to him.

I remember in the early sixties when Beatlemania was at its height; you've all seen the film clips where young people rush forward and literally fling themselves at the fab four to touch them....as if by doing so a little bit of their stardust will brush off onto them.

But unlike the Beatle fans who just wanted to get close enough to touch the coat sleeve of their hero for bragging rights amongst their friends, the crowds in our story want to get close enough to touch Jesus's cloak so they would be healed.

That is how I imagine the scene unfolding as Jesus and his disciples step ashore. So much for peace and quiet or a time of rest and recovery. I think if I was stepping ashore at that time, my response would not be the same as that of Jesus.

Anger, possibly. Despair, probably. Compassion? No way. I would be asking why the crowd can't cut me a bit of slack. I'm tired out; I need some me-time.

Yet Jesus doesn't hesitate. He responds to the needs of the people out of a sense of deep compassion. Mark tells us that Jesus had compassion on the crowd, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

My brother-in-law is a farmer, and he assures me that sheep are not the brightest animals in the world. In fact, sheep are helpless and hopeless without a shepherd.

And I could imagine the disciples thinking, without my sleep I'm helpless and hopeless too! But then, of course...I'm not Jesus and nor are the disciples. Yes, I would almost certainly have empathised with the people.

I could relate to their pain as if it was my own and I'm sure the disciples would have done too. But empathy, like sympathy, is grounded in emotion and feeling, but it does not have an active component to it.

To have compassion means getting involved. Compassion is not concerned with material or physical things. It is concerned with the human spirit and soul. It is acting to alleviate the suffering of others. It is what makes Jesus set aside his tiredness to put the needs of others first.

And that's a very difficult act to follow. But it is an act, nonetheless which both the disciples and all faithful followers have to remember and do likewise.

The missional work of Heidi Baker and Mother Theresa immediately spring to mind as examples of compassion in action. Also, the work of Compassion International which has pioneered missionary help for thousands of children, and I know that many of us sponsor a child through that organisation.

Our sponsorship enables us to share the meaning of compassion through our prayers, letters, and financial support. It is an action which helps meet the basic needs of a child and it helps to give them hope.

And it is out of hope that many of the people flock to Jesus, the hope of either being healed themselves or for the healing of their friends and family.

Mark tells us that the crowd begged Jesus to let them touch even the edge of his cloak – in just the same way as Gilly and Carol taught recently how the woman in the crowd with the blood issue had done.

On that occasion Jesus told the woman that it was her faith that had healed her. Today's reading ends with confirmation that all who touched the edge of Jesus' cloak were healed. Their faith and Christ's compassion saw to that.

And despite their weariness with their physical and spiritual strength at a low ebb, the disciples would have been there doing their part to ensure Jesus's compassion was not wasted but helped anoint and heal the future lives of so many people.

In just the same way the compassion shown by Catherine and William Booth has survived for over 200 years in the guise of the Salvation Army. The Army's value statement includes the words....we have compassion for all people and....we aim to meet human needs in Jesus's name.

Shortly before his death, in what turned out to be his final sermon, William Booth spoke these stirring words:

While women weep as they do now, I'll fight;
while little children go hungry as they do now, I'll fight;
while men go to prison, in and out, in and out, as they do now, I'll fight;
while there is a drunkard left;
while there is a poor lost girl upon the streets;
while there remains one dark soul without the light of God, I'll fight –
I'll fight to the very end.

The disciples may well have been tired out; but they would continue to fight for compassion to win the day so that the hopes of everyone in those crowds were met.

You might say they would fight the good fight, with all their might. If that's not a good intro to our next hymn, I don't know what is.

Revd. Terry Ward-Hall, 18 July 2021