

## Worship Resources

### *Contextual Bible Study Notes for July Lectionary Readings*

St Bride's Episcopal Church, Glasgow

#### *Introduction*

The report on this series of Bible studies comes from a Scottish Episcopal Church group meeting in the West End of Glasgow. This group has met together regularly since 2003 and for this series had ten participants in all (six to nine people at each meeting), two of these being clergy. The apparent homogeneity of a single church group belies the diversity of the church background of the participants who have come from the Quaker movement, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian as well as Anglican traditions. The group also represent a variety of political perspectives. This all lends richness to our consideration of the texts. All take seriously the application of this study to the here and now. The group have contributed corporately and as individuals to the development of new structures and processes for the congregation and continue to do so. For those without a strong voice in church affairs, this method of Bible study has been found to be a useful means of empowerment. The group can both communicate the views of these individuals, and also give them the confidence to make their own opinions known.

Over the course of the studies, the group began to develop an impression of the series of texts as a whole. The passages are not, strictly speaking, a continuous narrative (the account of the feeding of the five thousand coming from John's gospel, the rest from Mark). However, they do fit together temporally. We noted the development of the response of the crowd from a desperately needy, chaotic conglomerate of 'sheep without a shepherd', jostling for the healer to attend to their own concerns, to a more altruistic collective, bringing to Jesus those not able to travel by themselves and recognizing Him as Messiah. A second theme was the mechanics of the miracles; faith is integral to the process. Without the faith of the people, Jesus was unable to perform any great

works in his home town. We were interested in the concept of Jesus feeling power going out of him in healing; this led to some speculation about the effect of the miracles on Jesus himself. The notion of healing as requiring energy or physical effort emphasized for us His humanity and need for rest and solitude. The third and final theme was the universality of Jesus' touch, His ability to meet the individual needs of people regardless of social standing, gender, age, and with *disregard* to the taboos and legislation of the times. When the world disregards or abandons the little, insignificant people, Jesus meets them with love and concern. This theme struck us forcefully in our retrospective discussion of the series before writing this account. In looking back to our study of the feeding of the five thousand we were aware that we had overlooked the contribution of the boy who had offered his bread and fish.

#### *Mark 5:21-43*

As we read about the healing of Jairus' daughter and the haemorrhaging woman, members of the group were struck by: Jairus begging Jesus repeatedly; that the woman had endured MUCH under a number of physicians; both Jairus and the woman made public declarations of their problems (which were desperate); one was a leader the other an outcast; the demands placed on Jesus; this was all happening before a crowd; a sense of voyeurism at the spectacle of the miracles; Jesus had a finite reserve of energy for healing and ministry.

We noted that Jairus, a leader of the synagogue, was powerful and an example to the people. Perhaps he was comparatively wealthy? Unlike the woman, he was named. Did Mark assume that people would recognize him? Jairus is also humble, patient, trusting, and persistent in his anguish.

The woman's cameo is also very moving and personal. We wondered about her anonymity – was it

because of the shame of her condition? At some time she had been wealthy enough to afford physicians. She was desperate, yet had enormous faith and she defied Jewish taboos (mixing with others, touching Jesus' garment).

We noted that Jairus had to wait – despite his anxiety – while Jesus dealt with the woman. Even in this delay, Jairus' need is acknowledged by Jesus, so therefore Jairus' faith was not undermined. Both Jairus and the woman were sure that Jesus would respond to them.

For the woman, telling the whole truth was also part of the healing. It was as though the relationship with Jesus became as important as the healing itself. Jesus called her 'daughter' – an affectionate term which supported this notion of relationship. The effect of her encounter with Jesus was immediate. Jesus gave her more than she expected or asked for, even if she did not approach him directly. She wanted to be 'well'. Jesus told the woman to 'go in peace' – restoring the woman to her place in society, emphasising the completeness of the healing.

We discussed what this episode told us about the nature of Jesus and God's purpose for the world. Jesus was not compromised by the touch of an unclean woman: the effect was of Jesus on the woman – meeting Jesus transformed the woman's life. Jesus' desire for people to be well overturned the rules of ritual cleanliness. Jesus could also deal with more than one situation at a time. Even so, Jesus took the time to attend to the needs of individuals. This story gives an insight into Jesus' humanity as he feels the effect of power going out of him.

This passage illustrated the idea that God cares for all people, wanting us all to be whole and in relationship with him. It is clear that Jesus did not heal everyone, but the intention of these stories, we believe, makes it clear that God does not want people to be ill – nor is death part of God's plan; resurrection into the arms of the family foreshadowed resurrection into the Kingdom of God.

God asks us to set aside our fears to find faith.

We considered God's purpose for us in caring for people, and how people want to be cared for in our own context. We need the flexibility to respond to people in different ways. In seeking God's healing, it can be difficult to tell God the whole truth and to admit to our needs. This story encouraged us to continue to ask for healing; to consciously remember our own difficulties in order to take them

to God/Jesus. We also asked, 'Is there a way of giving thanks for healing?' We noted the significance of the congregational response after the invitation to communion in the Anglican rite: 'I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.'

### *Mark 6:1-13*

The vivid language of this passage made an immediate impression. We noted that Jesus' power was undermined by the lack of faith of individuals. Their knowledge of Jesus' origins stopped them from accepting the evidence before them. It seemed to be difficult to get through to those who knew Jesus well. Jesus is not 'meek and mild' here – he was taken to the limit by the unbelief of the people. The work with the twelve reminded us how this set the pattern for later disciples (e.g. Franciscans) in that Jesus' followers need minimal equipment.

In the space of thirteen verses we identified the following sequence: Jesus came back to his home town after doing deeds of great power and preached in the synagogue. People took offence and Jesus was unable to do deeds of power. There is energy here, as well as channelled anger. Jesus went out to the villages, he called the twelve and gave them instructions, sending them out two by two.

In discussing the relationships in the passage, it seemed that Jesus did not 'belong' to his home town any more. While Mary and siblings had remained, Jesus was different, and the people were prepared to 'deflate' him. We wondered why the disciples accompanied Jesus home: was it a personal visit or mission? Were they following their teacher everywhere? Was it curiosity? Jesus' relationship with his disciples stands in stark contrast to his relationship with his old neighbours. There was trust between Jesus and his disciples. The disciples accepted Jesus' authority and he delegated power to them. Jesus nurtured the dependency of the disciples on God.

We thought about how Jesus' encounter in his home town informed the advice he then gave to his disciples. People did not deny Jesus' deeds, but they still did not consider Jesus to be worthy of credit. Subsequently he 'could do no deed of power there'. Negativity detracted from Jesus' ability. It seems that Jesus rallied himself: a new determination overtook his difficulties in his home town. Jesus' advice flowed from his experience in his home town. It showed resilience, even anger, as he prepared the twelve for

difficult receptions or rejection. In empowering the disciples, Jesus' power was increased.

This passage was difficult to engage with in terms of practice, but we thought that Jesus' resilience in the face of being undermined is a model for us in facing rejection. We recognized how it may not always be those who are closest to you who will support you. In that case we may need to 'shake dust off' in our minds, if not in practice! It is important not to carry emotions, attitudes, etc. over from one situation to another. Christians could look for fellow believers with whom to grow and develop in the faith. Our confidence should lie in keeping to the basic gospel message (verse 12), along with the promise that God's power is realized through doing this.

The group then reflected on how churches deal with volunteers. The leadership should, like Jesus, have the courage to delegate. Sharing jobs and work saves individuals from becoming tired and anguished. Volunteers are built up where there is trust and empathy. Even so, people face the challenges of being pulled back into experiences where one is treated in a childlike way. We need the skills to recognize and to resist situations where individuals can be undermined in this way. Here we see resilience modelled by channelling anger and disappointment into something more positive. Then, in apparently fruitless situations, this passage suggests that there comes a point where one simply has to 'shake off the dust'.

#### *Mark 6:14-29*

'Scruffy third world justice' was our immediate reaction. The familiar story of the beheading of John the Baptist still had the power to repulse us. We were struck by the vindictiveness of Herodias' grudge-feud, and by the devastation caused by weak Herod out of his position of power.

This story is crowded with characters: the royal family, guests and courtiers, guards, soldiers, informants and disciples. The group mapped out the relationships between the people mentioned in the passage. It became clear that Herod was a key figure in most of these relationships; yet, his experiences were relentlessly negative. His family, courtiers, servants and fellow regional rulers regarded the king as someone either to be feared or exploited. Only in his relationship with John did he find something different.

The group considered Mark's reasons for relating this story. We identified a familiar theme in Mark's gospel; that is, 'Who is Jesus?' In this passage, the answers are confused and uncertain. A prophet? John the Baptist? Guilty Herod hopes yet fears that John is back from the dead. He cannot see who Jesus really is.

There are similarities between this account and several Old Testament incidents concerning sinful monarchs and their maverick prophets. Herod's fascination with the imprisoned Baptist reminded us of King Zedekiah, unable to resist conversations with his prophet Jeremiah, chained up in the royal courtyard. The friction between Herodias, Herod and John resembled that between Jezebel, Ahab and Elijah. The gospel writer anchors his story firmly in Old Testament tradition. John was a prophet like the great prophets of yore; he preached God's truth like they did; like them, he suffered for it. Yet the fate of John also leaves the reader with a sense of foreboding, as it foreshadows the death of Jesus. What happened to the herald will happen to the King. This passage had a particular relevance to the first gospel readers. At Mark's time of writing, the early Christians were undergoing persecution. This story helped them to make sense of their situation. John the Baptist had suffered and died; so had Jesus; so they too might be expected to endure imprisonment and death for their Lord.

This passage relates to contemporary experiences of religious persecution. The group discussed 'repressive tolerance' experienced by Christians in modern Britain, where the media may appear to slight Christianity. Or, a movement towards 'political correctness' may attempt to secularize Christmas. However, such persecutions seemed trifling, compared with the experience of Christians elsewhere in the world. We discussed recent episodes in Indonesia and Iraq, where the beheading of Christians seemed to bear directly upon this biblical passage. Our contextual study of John the Baptist's story, therefore, reminded us to pray for suffering Christians abroad and to support charities dedicated to helping them.

Christians in Britain are not really persecuted, we concluded; therefore, we should feel free to share our faith. We looked again at the relationship between John and his disciples. Relationships between Christians have a quality which is not found in other relationships; moreover, this can be attractive

to those outside the faith, just as Herod was attracted to John. We resolved to take John and his disciples as an inspiration in our caring for one another and in our relationships with others outside the Christian community.

*Mark 6:30-34, 53-56*

At first glance, this text appeared unpromising: a Bible study with the main story missed out. Nevertheless, this short passage proved remarkable for a sense of movement and strong emotion. The group observed the contrast between Jesus' deserted place and the busy villages and farms. The disciples were excited, telling Jesus about their adventure. The crowd were desperate, chaotic, 'sheep without a shepherd'. Jesus remained calm and compassionate for his disciples and the crowd.

Furthermore, Jesus' compassion was active. He listened carefully to his disciples and the crowd, discerning their needs and working out how to meet those needs. He was always on the move, on the boat, or walking to those villages and farms. Everywhere he went, he gave of himself.

We wondered what contemporary observers might have learned from Jesus' actions, about the nature of God. Perhaps they saw God's compassion. Perhaps they realized that God longs to heal; that he seeks us out; that he has become approachable and accessible through Jesus. References to the sick touching his cloak reminded us of the story of the haemorrhaging woman: did the crowd make similar mental links? Through his healing miracles, they may have begun to recognize Jesus as the messiah.

As we discussed the people's response to Jesus, we were struck by their intense desire for healing miracles; moreover, they were a generous crowd, taking the time to bring along those who were too sick to bring themselves. They were in awe of Jesus, begging respectfully: no one tried to take advantage of him. This crowd was a benign presence, questing and anxious, but self-controlled. Physical healing was their immediate concern; nevertheless, they listened to Jesus' teaching.

How might this passage inform us about society's expectations of religion today? Modern people still look for healing; they still want miracles. We look for love and compassion and want to feel valued. Like the crowd in the passage, we need leadership and guidance; thus there are certain expectations of ordained people, both spiritual and practical. People

want to be treated by the churches as individuals and expect a response to individual needs. We observed that people sometimes respond enthusiastically to Jesus, who have low expectations of organized religion.

Finally, we considered the changes we might make in our own church context, to address these expectations. Practical ideas were put forward regarding the structures of church leadership: we wanted to be equipped to communicate clearly, as Jesus did with the crowd. We also wanted to be active, like Jesus. Our reflection on this passage led us to think about those who 'touch the fringe' of the church: how might we make this easier for them? We planned ways of making the church entrance more attractive; offering the church as a place for 'drop-in' meditation; and inviting local people to leave their prayer requests at church, where they would be the focus of our special intercessions.

*John 6:1-20*

This text comprises two separate narratives; which we studied in parallel, drawing out the common themes. Both stories drew us into thinking about who Jesus was to the people of his time, and who we understand him to be now.

In the discussion, we considered the interactions between the characters, but interestingly overlooked the boy who brought the bread and fish. Reflecting on the text, we were aware that our discussion resonated with a common theme of the series that the little, insignificant people can be overlooked by everyone but Jesus. A frequent, seemingly mundane, groundwork question of our Bible studies is to list the characters. If we had done this, we might not have overlooked the boy.

The description of the crowd in the text suggested their growing recognition of Jesus – not just as a miracle worker, but as Messiah – through his healing and his feeding of the people. They look to him for leadership and want to make him king. Jesus responds with humility and self-assurance; he had no need of worldly position.

For the disciples, Jesus is also a mysterious figure – he walks on the water. His actions all appear to be considered and planned, but we are not always clear why; he asks the disciples for their opinion, but already knows what action to take.

We considered the emotions in the passage and how Jesus responded to these emotions. Near the

beginning of the account, Jesus sits down with the disciples, emphasizing his physical closeness to them. Jesus sees the crowd approaching from far off and waits for them: he deals with the people's emotions rather than avoiding them.

When the crowd arrive they have a sense of expectancy and curiosity. Jesus takes this and gives something to each of them, not just physical, but also spiritual sustenance and satisfaction. All of the crowd could participate in and benefit from this miracle. Where the disciples are anxious and puzzled about how to respond to the hungry crowd, Jesus provides the answer, first offering thanks to God. The crowd's mood then takes a darker turn as they become more forceful, even violent and delusional in their adulation. At this point, Jesus disengages. He responds to the emotions of the disciples in the boat: he answers their terror with reassurance and love: 'it is I'. Jesus' compassion and care pervades all these encounters.

How do we, as disciples, make sense of these signs? We discussed how Jesus responds to our emotions and need. He often reveals himself unexpectedly in the simplest of circumstances. He meets our needs, as he did the crowd's, but does not always accede to our wishes, as he resisted the crowd's attempt to crown him. We cannot always be in control of our situation – we need to allow the Lord to act and we have to accept that we cannot fully understand His interventions. Through the signs we see glimpses of both Jesus' humanity and His divinity though only part of a fuller picture. We may not understand, but Jesus declares 'it is I' and we are invited to trust him. There is no need for anxiety or terror. The size of the problem is irrelevant to God's work; we are given the resources we need to deal with changing situations.

Translating this to our situation, we used the analogy of the bread being taken and blessed, broken and then given. This was seen as a cyclical rather than linear process, with ourselves and our work being offered repeatedly. The different parts of the body of believers may be working in different ways at different times. We also saw ourselves and our church as being bread for our community through both the physical existence of the building and our human presence. Following from this there were a number of practical suggestions about how we could serve the world: through unexpected conversations, through ecumenical events, in the use of our premises, through the media. We should identify the needs in our community by asking people, perhaps even knocking on doors, and from this develop strategies and skills for outreach. Our discipleship leads us to find ways to offer love, prayer and the gospel message to the people around us.

### *Conclusions*

In our five weeks of study we were intrigued to find the various interactions and relationships between Jesus, the disciples, the crowd, John the Baptist, Herod, etc. We saw how our faith and healthy relationships are crucial to God's intention for His people to be whole and satisfied. Finally, we learned to notice the needs of all people, and, as Christ's body, to respond to them.

The Contextual Bible Study approach enabled us to make a more detailed examination of these texts and brought us to a number of practical applications of these gospel principles to our everyday lives.

RUSSELL JONES, HELEN BALL,  
JACQUI HOWISON and JOHN HULSTROM

### *Coming next month . . .*

Joseph Verheyden introduces the Shepherd of Hermas in our continuing Apostolic Fathers series. Also, Susan Eastman offers a reading of the Parable of the Prodigal Son and David Baker reflects on the practice of gleaning in ancient and modern society.

Copyright of Expository Times is the property of Sage Publications, Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.