

**Prelude:** Psalm tune “French” as harmonised in the 1635 Psalter played by Alan Buchan

**Words of Welcome:** When we come to God in worship we are taking time from other activities to remind ourselves and to show to God that he is worth our attention. And whatever words we use, that is praise of the highest order. So we begin our service today singing the hymn

**Hymn:** Praise, I will praise you, Lord

**Prayer:**

Praise, love and service, these are what we would offer to you, Lord God our Creator, Saviour and comforter.

We offer you praise for who you are: the one and only God, who made and sustains all things and who can bring good out of evil and blessing from tragedy.

We bring you love because you first loved us and showed it by sending your Son Jesus to live with us and suffer among us and die for us. We bring you love because your love surrounds us and in hard times you carry us close to your heart.

We bring you service: the service of worship; the service of your kingdom with our whole lives. We know that none of what we do to serve you is worth anything without your presence with us, but you have promised us that presence and help and so, once again we praise you.

As we live in your strength and freeing forgiveness, may praise, love and service be the hallmarks of your presence in our lives, for all to see.

And hear us as we pray as Jesus taught us, 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, the power and the glory for ever. Amen.

**Reading:** Genesis 1:26-28

**Reading:** Mark 6:45-56

This story picks up directly from the end of the last, the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus has sent off the disciples, still pondering the happening with the loaves and fish, to take the boat over to the other shore. He has dismissed the crowd and gone to pray. And then later the wind gets up, and he knows that if it is a bit blowy on the land it might be really quite stormy on the lake. Now, there are experienced fishermen among the disciples, who have been working these waters since they were big enough to help their fathers, so the chances were that the disciples were going to be fine, but Jesus just wants to see them, and decides to go and see for himself that all is well. He is like the loving mother who has no reason to think that her children are not sleeping safely, but goes anyway just to see them for herself. Have you ever done that? And sometimes the parent who does this finds that they inadvertently wake and startle their children.

Mark tells us that the disciples were straining at the oars, but also that Jesus was going to walk right past them – walking on the water – I know, we’ll get to that. But whether by moonlight or by the light of lanterns in the boat they catch sight of him, of a man standing where no one should be able to stand, they cry out in fear. Who can blame them? Mark does

not. And Jesus does not. Jesus reassures them and gets into the boat with them and at once everything is all right.

But the disciples are utterly astounded. Again, who can blame them? Well, now Mark does: he says that “They did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.” Mark is of the opinion that the loaves, the feeding of the multitude, and the walking on water were part of the same phenomenon. But what phenomenon? Having given us this hint, what conclusion is Mark pushing us towards? Both the feeding and the walking on water are things which we would not expect to happen: they show us Jesus’ sovereignty over the natural world. If the disciples had reflected on the loaves and fish, they might have realised that the water would not pose a problem for Jesus either (though they might still have been a bit surprised, I should have thought).

The question Mark is seeking to raise in our minds, by showing us the disciples’ minds, is that of who Jesus is. The disciples had asked that very question back the first time that they had seen Jesus calm a storm. The easy answer to the question is that Jesus is the Son of God and so none of this is a problem. But that is not the answer that Mark is going to take us to. Rather he is leading up to the point where Jesus is recognised as the Messiah (we find it in chapter 8). The Messiah was not expected to be a divine figure but a human one, a fully human one, Israel’s Lord, who is to be the world’s Lord, showing in his sovereignty over food and over the lake waters the sovereignty that the Messiah would have over the whole world (not just the world of people, but the created world).

Mark will also want us to see Jesus as divine, but his way of showing us this comes in the second half of his gospel and is demonstrated in the hunger, thirst, fear, sorrow, suffering and death of Jesus. Just now Mark shows us that Jesus is completely and fully human, as no one has been since the creation of the world and the **overthrow** of God’s good order. As no one has ever been, but as God created us to be: when he gave us dominion over his creation.

Jesus is the fully human one and we see his humanity in his sovereignty over creation and we see his humanity, and also his divinity in the compassion he has for those he loves.

**Hymn:** When the storms of life are raging stand by me

The hallmarks of our passage are compassion and misunderstanding. Jesus has compassion on the disciples, both in his seeking to see for himself that they are all right out on the windy lake, and in his changing his plan and getting into the boat with them when they are frightened and need his reassuring presence. St. Augustine, commenting on this story said: “He came treading on the waves and so he puts all the swelling tumults of life under his feet. Christians, why afraid?” Why afraid, when Jesus shows us the compassion of God?

Jesus’ compassion is also where the lesson of the loaves comes in. When Jesus was teaching the crowd and perceived that they were becoming hungry, he had compassion on them, and that compassion is what drove him in the matter of feeding them, just as compassion is what has driven him to ignore the fluidity of the water and go to make sure his friends are all right. When Jesus’ actions are motivated by his compassion, then the usual rules of the world cannot stand in his way.

When the boat gets to the shore, landing at Gennesaret, just a few miles round the coast from Bethsaida, people see him and come and rush around getting others to come and they bring to him those who are ill. We who live with modern medicine and a still-functioning National Health Service can have no idea how frightening illness was to a people who had few good cures and little knowledge of how their bodies worked. It is only in the past hundred years or so, that people have not feared almost any symptom of unwellness, because you never knew when that headache, or shortness of breath, or lack of appetite might be something that would cause your death within a matter of days. The fear of the current

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Covid crisis, when we don't know which infection will turn fatal, is a faint echo of that worry. Illness was very much feared.

So when Jesus came to town – or to the village or the farm, as Mark says - the first thought of many people seems to have been to get a healing. They didn't really want to listen to him, they wanted what he could give them. In fact the people came flocking to him to make use of him.

And Jesus had compassion on them, because he knew their fears and he knew that they did not understand what more he could give. Compassion is love which understands. It is love which is felt because we know the situation of those around us, and share it. Jesus got into the boat with the disciples, he didn't just shout commands (to them or the storm) from the shore. He lived the life that the people around him lived, without the safeguards of wealth or luxury, without being obviously divine, which would make a real barrier between him and everyone else, and so he knew what their lives were. And so he was driven by compassion.

The disciples needed to see these healings, this use that Jesus allowed people to make of him, because they needed to know that Jesus' compassion was not just for them, the inner circle of friends, but for all. And they needed to see it because Jesus knew that if this was how people treated him, it would be how his followers would also be treated. And so it has been. Since the birth of the church just days after Jesus' ascension to heaven, there have been those who come to the church seeking what they can get. People have come in their need, and their fear, because they understand that the followers of Jesus will have compassion and seek to help them. Some of these people will stick around to listen and to learn and may become disciples, but many others will not.

The calling of the disciple, the follower of Jesus, is to have compassion. The calling of the Church is to be compassionate, getting alongside people with love and understanding. To have compassion on those we know well, and on those we do not know at all. We live in a world where people are very lost and frightened. This pandemic has raised fears in many of us: not just fears for our own health and survival, should we contract the disease, but fears for the continuing of life as we have known it, and for our livelihoods and for our innocent pleasures and for our society.

As disciples of Jesus we have something to offer to people, both now and in the unknown future. We can offer what the church has always offered: compassion. Compassion is more than a soothing word: it is a listening ear and responsive actions. It is getting into the boat with the people who are straining at the oars, and it is walking among those who do not know how to heal their sick bodies. Compassion demands that first of all we be where the need is, seeing, touching, hearing, understanding. Compassion demands that we bring with us the love of God which can transform any situation.

And people may not understand. People may get what they want and turn away, or may not get what they want and may turn to mock, but we will be following Christ who was the fully human Son of God, and who allowed for misunderstanding and met it with compassion.

**Hymn:** May the mind of Christ my Saviour live in me from day to day

**Prayer:**

Lord, in a world where compassion is too often lacking, we pray for ourselves, our neighbours and your church, that we would learn to live with the compassion of Christ. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

As we remember and thank you for the compassion of Christ, who came to walk among us and experience the troubles and sorrows of life along with its joys, so we pray that we would not shy away from friends or neighbours who are in troubled places.

We pray for the people we know who are finding lockdown difficult, if not physically, then emotionally. We pray for those who are lonely, or who are grieving, or who are afraid. Help us to find ways to show them your compassion, which never leaves the suffering person alone.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

As we remember how Jesus put aside his own agenda to care for lost and hopeless people, so we pray that we would learn to live unselfishly. May your people set an example to our neighbours and our national leaders in the way that we live with your love as our guiding principle.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

As we see how Jesus cared for those who were ill and frightened, so we pray for the world where Coronavirus still rages and devastates in so many ways. We pray for the vaccine to be given not only in richer but also in poorer countries, and we ask that as you bring us through this time it would be to a future which is governed by the compassion of your kingdom.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Hear all our prayers, spoken and unsaid, for we ask them in the name of Jesus. Amen.

**Hymn:** Longing for light, we wait in darkness

**Benediction**

May you know the compassionate love of God and take it with you wherever you go.

And may the blessing of God Almighty,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you now and always.

Amen.

**Postlude:** The opening section of "Grand Choeur in Bb by Théodore Dubois. Played by John Crombie