

6 Aug 2017



**Readings:**

**Old Testament: Isaiah 55:1-5**

**New Testament: Romans 9;1-5**

**Gospel Matthew 14:13-21**

On the Fridays in August some of us in the church, together with friends from other churches and the Chelmsford foodbank, are providing a meal for Families in the school holidays- called 4Families. Children and their carers receive a nutritious meal, either cooked or cold, together with a sweet, tea coffee or squash, and activities to keep the children occupied. It is a great ministry, taking place here on Fridays and on Wednesdays at Trinity Methodist Church. We have been planning these meals for some time, and we have had meetings to agree menus, crafts, staffing, and all-important – who is in charge in the kitchen! Foodbank give us a good estimate of who will be coming at each session. Now many of you are used to catering for a family, and extended family, but what are you like when you have to cater for 40 or more? This is where we discover the St Andrew's secret weapon - Gill Liversedge. Gill as many of you will know has not only been a teacher but an active Guider for very many years, and has organised many Guide. Tell Gill, how many adults and children are coming, and she is very good at determining the quantities of food that we will need so we can source these from the Foodbank, local businesses and from the helpers. Even when Gill has not actually been able to be present she has produced a list of quantities so that it is much easier for the cooks to prepare the right amount of food, providing that the numbers she has been given are right. We are all immensely grateful to all who help with 4Families, and especially to Gill who has used a natural talent for organisation coupled with years of experience to help us.

We all have certain talents- the word coming from the parable of the talents in Matthew 25. It is part of the teaching of Jesus that we should use and develop these talents to the full. Used rightly they can be of great service to the kingdom of God, and of service to the world. This is why we work, in paid or other work, using what we have to provide for ourselves and others.

But our work is most effective when we can plan ahead, and make sure that the right resources are available when we need them - called logistics in the army – as Napoleon once said 'an army marches on its stomach.' If the soldiers are always foraging for food, they have little time for the tasks that are given to them. Now just imagine for a moment, a general who suddenly says to the catering quartermaster, the one in charge of logistics, 'In 20 minutes a division of soldiers, 5000 is going to arrive, and they will all need a hot meal in one hour's time.' The quartermaster would probably say something like this ' If only you had told me three days ago, I could have got in supplies of food and staff, but I cannot do this in the time scale you have given me. It is not humanly possible.

This is something like what the disciples felt in our reading when Jesus told them to give the people something to eat. Jesus has called the disciples to with him to a remote place for some rest and recuperation, but the crowds had followed him, and he had compassion on them and taught them; this was not in the original itinerary. It was growing late and the crowds would need food soon, so logically they should be dismissed so they could buy food at the neighbouring villages. But Jesus says "you give them something to eat". The expression on the disciples faces would have been incredulous – Imagine what Gill Liversedge would have said if I had said at 10 minutes to 12.00,, by the way Gill, it is not 40 children and family members who are coming but 400. As well as other things, the disciples and Gill would have said, sorry it is not humanly possible – I can't provide for that number at such short notice, and then possibly made a comment about vicars?

Now this is not in any way to denigrate proper planning, and using talents of organisation for the benefit of the kingdom of God. Please do not think for one moment I am being critical of this. I am not the most organised of people and I very much value the gifting of those who can plan and organise, but I do have to say to you as Christians, that there are limits as to what we as Christians can plan in God's economy. There is a danger in relying on human organisation that we **over-rely** on our human talents and leave no room for the spontaneity of the Holy Spirit. We can come to rely on human rules and regulations and human wisdom, and by its very nature this can lead to the power resting in those who are good at organising. I have seen some organisers becoming rather angry at those who are helping them who get it wrong, you only have to look at Hell's Kitchen on TV with domineering chefs, and sometimes in churches volunteers can be hurt and put off serving by over enthusiastic organisers who are a bit too controlling. Over the last 2 months we have been hearing about grace - God's riches at Christ's expense. Grace, whereby our sins have separated us from God and Jesus' death alone is able to atone for our sins.

**Not the labour of my hands  
Can fulfil Thy law's demands;  
Could my zeal no respite know,  
Could my tears forever flow,  
All for sin could not atone:  
Thou must save, and Thou alone.**

**Nothing in my hand I bring,  
Simply to Thy cross I cling;  
Naked, come to Thee for dress;  
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;  
Foul, I to the fountain fly:  
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.**

By Grace and by grace alone are we saved, not by works – it is the gift of god. Before the exile, the Jewish people had ignored God, and were punished by the exile in Babylon. After the exile the Jews realised their sin and the result of not keeping the law and intermarrying and they became much more strict- the start of the synagogue and Phariseeism movement. What we would call works of righteousness - we show our commitment by what we do, by our zeal for the church and the law. But as we have learned over the past few weeks, the law could not impart righteousness – the law could never make us right with God, and it led to people over emphasising work, good in itself but lacking in understanding for the weakness of human nature, and in effect pushing out the grace of **God**.

This is what Paul is saying in Romans 9; he longs for his own people, the Jews, to give up seeing the law as their own personal possession and see it as a way of pointing people to their need of grace, but they could not see it.

In our gospel reading Jesus does an act of grace, a miracle, to show our need of His work of grace in our lives instead of relying on human logistics - which in this case would not work. Jesus asks what is available – just some loaves and fishes. Then Jesus shows what is possible when God takes the minimal human resources and blesses them - the super-abundant blessing of God's grace. There is enough and more to spare. It is not wrong to work, it is right and proper and no-one should think that God will bless a lack of proper planning. There are the 5 'p's, proper planning prevents poor performance - but it is not how our relationship with God works. All we have is grace, a gift from Go; **John 3:16** tells us salvation is by grace. Life in Christ is by grace. There is always the danger that we try to take control back from God and treat the Christian faith as a set of principles to live by - hard work, good behaviour, care for the poor, etc. All very good in themselves but unable to connect us to God for the work of transformation into the likeness of Christ, which is the work of the Holy Spirit. Where **we** want control of our lives **we** exclude the Holy Spirit; he must be in control for the Holy Spirit's job is to point us to Jesus. This was the danger of Phariseeism. The danger of saying Jesus is lord, but not doing what he said ( Matt 7:21-25) – we need to be believing on Him, listening to Him. The danger of being a Martha (Luke 10:38-42); having the Lord in her house, but seeing her role as the catering – important but not as important as listening to Jesus as Mary did. Mary has chosen what is better- to be dependent and to listen to Jesus.

Our OT reading from Isaiah 55 1-2, come buy food

**“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David”.**

Come to Jesus for the food that will never stop - not earthly food that will need to be replenished again and again. It is free, a gift of grace, from the abundant blessing of Jesus. What you labour for in your work will provide for your material needs to some extent, but trusting in the grace of God will meet all of your needs physical and spiritual. Feed on Jesus, as we do symbolically later in the bread and the wine, make the word of God your food, spend time in prayer with Him, know that you are a beloved child of God saved by grace. Then work, but work knowing that your talents are themselves a gift from God, not to be boasted in but given over for God's use and blessing. As you live in this grace of blessing and dependence on God then He will give you things to do, which will only work if you depend on Him, but you will be the objects of his love and blessing because you are doing it God's way not your way. You see we can be doing what we consider to be God's work in a human way, using our human talents. This is not wrong in itself, but it can lead to pushing God out and relying on our own understanding of what God wants. Then when this view is challenged, as Jesus did with the Pharisees, those who rely on themselves can get very angry that their efforts are apparently being disrespected, but in fact their efforts have to be challenged because their focus is on themselves not on God – shock of those who said Lord, Lord, did we not do things in your name?

**Mt 7:22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' 23 Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'**

– you did not make a relationship with Jesus a priority, instead relied on your own understanding of what Christian behaviour required.

With Jesus, it is all of grace, from first to last. It has to be – otherwise if it could be achieved by works the cross would not be needed. But the cross is needed because your sin and my sin is so great that nothing short of the sinless Saviour's death in my place could atone for us. There was no other good enough. In this parable, Jesus is showing the limit of human activity in the spiritual life, and the super abundant provision of God to help us live the life He wants, as we surrender our lives to Jesus, and allow Him to lead and direct us. Living by human rules and organisations is the way to get stuck in our faith, a clear understanding of God and Jesus, but not growing in our understanding or practice of faith. We need to get unstuck by confessing our own reliance on ourselves and our talent, and admitting our poverty before God - as Isaiah said, "we who are thirsty come to Jesus, you who have no money come buy food and eat, with the super abundant provision of Jesus in grace. But there is a condition – empty hands, letting go of our own paltry resources, seeing ourselves as poor wretched blind, and coming,

**Just as I am, without one plea  
But that Thy blood was shed for me,  
And that Thou bid'st me come to Thee,  
O Lamb of God, I come.**

**Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind;  
Sight, riches, healing of the mind,  
Yea, all I need in Thee to find,  
O Lamb of God, I come.**

**Nothing in my hand I bring,  
Simply to Thy cross I cling;  
Naked, come to Thee for dress;  
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;  
Foul, I to the fountain fly:  
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.**

So maybe today is an opportunity to let go of human effort and to truly trust in God's provision of grace. To say,

**'I need spiritual feeding, only you Lord can do this. I need grace to let go of my own efforts to make myself right with you, and I now come as I am. I will give you my human effort, but I know this is not enough, but in Christ it is enough I will walk by faith and not by sight.**

**Just as I am, without one plea  
But that Thy blood was shed for me,  
And that Thou bid'st me come to Thee,  
O Lamb of God, I come.**

**Just as I am, Thou wilt receive,  
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve,  
Because Thy promise I believe,  
O Lamb of God, I come.**

**Just as I am, Thy love unknown  
Has broken every barrier down;  
Now to be Thine, yea, Thine alone,  
O Lamb of God, I come.**