**ADVENT – GOD IS LOVE 12th Dec 2021**

*The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things. And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.” But he answered them, “You give them something to eat.” And they said to him, “Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat?” And he said to them, “How many loaves do you have? Go and see.” And when they had found out, they said, “Five, and two fish.” Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups, by hundreds and by fifties. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men. (Mar 6:30-44)*

PRAYER

What a year it’s been!

With challenges and opportunities, surprises and unheard of events

The remarkable, disappointing, upsetting, and unfortunate…

Mixed with the astonishing, unexpected and overwhelming.

Who could have imagined it would ever be like this!? PAUSE

That is exactly how the disciples of Jesus were feeling…

There is no way they could have predicted how things were panning out

Who could have imagined life would now be like this!

It wasn’t that long ago when everything was all very predictable.

Yesterday was what we expected and tomorrow is something we could plan for…

But not this year.

One day we are heading out to our jobs – fishing, tax collecting, labouring…

the next we are no longer working – and wondering what next.

One day we are organising to see our family or hang out with our friends…

The next we are mixing with riff raff, healing the sick and hanging with sinners.

One day we are just going about life as we had always done…

The next we are with Jesus, casting out demons, confronting the religious elite,

healing hundreds and constantly on the move

Who could ever have imagined life would be like this!?

Feel familiar?

Sure – we may not quite be experiencing the same adventure of those first disciples.

But like them, life, is not quite what we expected it to be…

But isn’t that always the case?

This is not just a COVID thing… it is how life is. How it always is.

I had the privilege of being at government house on Monday for a presentation.

While there the governor Francis Adamson shared of her own experience.

Leaving school she expected to be an accountant!

But hating the studies she dropped out, moved to Canberra

and found some work as a public servant

Before long she found herself an ambassador.

For the next 30 years served in this role in a whole variety of countries

And now is Governor of South Australia!

In her own words – “I could never have imagined…

You just never know how things will turn out.”

This is true for all of us… PAUSE

But it’s the hard things, the bad things, the challenging things we notice.

These are the ones that tend to dominate.

We dream of finding a good job, a wonderful spouse, buying a nice house in a good neighbourhood, before having gorgeous, well behaved, easily managed and fun children who grow up to be successful independent adults who dote on us in the way we think we deserve!...

As I look around, as I think about my own journey – life has not been as we planned!

Some of us never managed to get married, buy the house, have children,

or go on that overseas holiday we dreamed for or intended to do.

For some, our marriages haven’t been the ‘happily ever after’ the movies portray…

or our children the easy, loveable characters we anticipated

For some our health or the health of our loved ones has had a dramatic impact

For others a significant and unexpected loss has caused your dreams to be shattered

For most of us – life doesn’t quite go the way we planned,

or turn out the way we anticipated!

That was certainly true for the disciples…

When they found Jesus, or more accurately, when Jesus found them and called them to follow Him – I imagine they had their hopes and dreams…

Hopes and dreams that were nothing like what they were experiencing now!

Sure it was an amazing journey… seeing so many people’s lives so radically and completely transformed as Jesus healed them or set them free…

Experiencing his power over storms, watching a dead girl come to life,

and being commissioned and able to do similar things in his name.

What a privilege, what a thrill…

But – being with Jesus was unsettling. It was disconcerting. Even dangerous. Possibly deadly!

They were now recognised as one of His followers…

Which if he had been what they expected would have been wonderful.

But Jesus was not quite what they expected.

He loved, it seemed, to rile those who had power, who had influence, authority.

He would intentionally break their laws – as if just to get up their goat.

On top of this he refused to follow the cultural norms

and expected traditions of all respectable people.

And sometimes he would even speak up, speak out, to confront

what he called their hypocritical ways.

This was indeed dangerous.

And now, news had just come – it was not just potentially, but in reality dangerous.

Deadly!

John. John the baptiser,

The prophet of God who prepared His way,

The one who had called people to repentance and pointed to Jesus as God’s promised rescuer and King…

He had just been cruelly, capriciously killed.

Had his head removed at the whim of the king to impress his guests!

Clearly it was impossible to anticipate how life was going to pan out.

Being on Jesus’ team would not necessarily protect us from the unforeseen and dangerous

There was no guarantee that it would all go well. Nor end badly! PAUSE

Jesus, clearly feeling the pain and loss of his cousins’ death…

tired out from intense and non-stop ministry…

hungry, exhausted and in deep grief…

Recognising both his need for a break…

and that his followers also need some time…

That they need to step aside,

be refreshed through space with the Father and each other…

regroup, and find comfort and consolation.

Mark records it this way: *And Jesus said to his disciples, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves.* PAUSE

We know this need.

The necessity to put up the shutters, batten down the hatches, and find a quiet, comfortable place to rest.

It’s what Jesus and his dearest friends needed – and that is what they set out to get.

And so they got in a boat and headed of to the other side of the lake.

In search of peace, rest and refreshment!

But the crowd… they didn’t know… or care.

Seeing Jesus’ leave, guessing where He was going,

they ran on ahead,

and as they ran, gathered others from the towns they passed through.

So that by the time Jesus arrived – the countryside was already filled with people.

Men, women and children hungry to meet Jesus, hungry to have him touch them,

speak to them, heal them. Desperate.

And here is what I find disturbing, compelling, remarkable.

Despite being in desperate need for a break…

Despite his closest friends being completely exhausted…

Mark tells us: *When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he* ***had compassion on them****, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*

He had compassion on them. He Loved them. He Cared for them.

Despite what he and his friends desperately needed

When faced with this needed crowd…

He stepped up and demonstrated this compassion, this love - in two ways. PAUSE

Let me begin with the second thing Jesus did that showed that he cared…

He fed them!

Now we know this bit of the story well.

It’s the bit we focus on.

The miraculous feeding of 5000 with just 5 loaves and 2 fish PAUSE

Let’s think about this for a bit.

What would it have been like to be there?

It’s been a long day.

You have been on the move,

on foot traveling as fast as you can from the other side of the lake

Desperately excited to see Jesus again, you have been joined by hundreds,

thousands of others

All expectant to receive from Jesus whatever you need.

But what you didn’t expect, hadn’t thought about until now,

was that you would get hungry.

And Jesus… knowing this need… And because he loved them – He fed them.

Such an ordinary, unspectacular need.

Something Jesus even suggested the disciples themselves could have met.

“You give them something to eat”, he had said

Now, without money or provisions – they knew that was impossible.

And said so.

But what they didn’t think about at the time…

What Mark takes the opportunity to tell us…

Is that it was as an expression of Jesus’ love and compassion for these hapless people that he fed them

Described as being “like sheep without a shepherd.”

Lost, vulnerable, hungry.

Out of compassion for the crowd – Jesus gave them the food they needed.

Did something simple and practical.

This is the nature of love isn’t it?

Mum’s you know this.

You love to do the simple practical things for your kids.

Wash their clothes, make their lunches, cook the meals, baby sit their kids…

Husbands, you who love your wives, know the importance of these simple practical expressions of affection.

There is nothing romantic about doing the dishes – but it is loving

There is nothing spectacular about taking out the bins, or mowing the lawn…

but it is a way to show your care.

It is also how we love our neighbours, or show our love for God…

by doing simple, practical things for the most vulnerable of the world…

visiting people in prison, clothing the naked,

feeding the hungry, caring for the sick...

Listening to the lonely, welcoming the stranger…

Doing things that indicate that we consider the other before ourselves

Because this is what love does!

This is what God has done for us.

What God loves to do for his children!

Consider - what practical ways does God show he loves you?

“Count your blessings – name them one by one.

Says the hymn many of us loved to sing.

“Count your blessings, see what the Lord has done!”

But perhaps today you are not feeling it.

You find it hard to find anything to count.

It may be that you need God to show he loves you in some practical way today

Why not tell him now. Not to know it up here -POINT TO HEAD

But to know it in hear – POINT TO HEART

For whatever reason, you may be feeling a little like the people in that crowd today.

God loves to demonstrate his love and compassion in simple practical ways..

So tell him what you need from Him today. PAUSE

So, out of love and compassion Jesus fed the crowd.

But it wasn’t the first thing he did.

His initial expression of love.

Mark puts it this way: *When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.* ***And he began to teach them many things****.*  And he began to teach them many things.

I love this.

I love that the first thing Jesus did to show his love and compassion…

was to teach them!

Clearly Jesus knows, believes, that teaching, being taught…

Hearing and discovering things about God…

is the first and most significant act of love one can do for another

I am not sure we feel the same!

Do we believe that helping people gain knowledge, understanding, truth

can be our greatest act of love?

Although if we really think about it – we do see evidence of this.

If any of you know any teachers. If you are a teacher.

A school teacher, a Sunday school teacher, a parent, a Life Group Leader…

What motivates you to teach those in your care…

is not some grandiose vision of power and prestige…

But love for your students.

Parents educate their children because they love them

and they grieve deeply when their children “never learn”!

Teachers teach – not because of the great pay, or the prestige of the profession…

but because they love children and know that learning is vital

Doctors educate you on your health because they want the best for you

Youth leaders teach young people because they love them and want them to know and experience the love of God

All of us who love others…

want those we care for to grow in their knowledge and understanding.

It’s what you do when you love.

And we see this in Jesus – his love and compassion was expressed through teaching.

Because there is no more greater expression of love than to teach others about God.

In 2016 I had the privilege of going to Cambodia.

There I saw first hand the importance of education

And the grief, the deep grief of parents and whole communities who were unable to ensure their children received a good education.

Because they knew that without it…

their children were destined to a life of poverty and all that that meant.

But not only that, there I also lived with and heard from those who had given up the comforts and pleasures of home…

travelled to live among and serve the Khmer people

to help them learn about Jesus.

Our Global Interaction workers were driven by a deep love.

A love of God, and from God for the people of Cambodia

A love which called them, drove them to leave everything

that they may “teach them about Jesus”

This we see here in Jesus Himself

his compassion and love for the people – resulted in him teaching them.

Teach them about – as we learn elsewhere “the Kingdom of God”

Jesus would teach us too

He deeply longs for us to learn, to experience, to know…

how much he loves us, how deeply he cares for us.

Love expressed perfectly through his death and resurrection

Love experienced absolutely when we discover he did it for me.

He did it for you.

This Love God wants you to “know”…

even that word is a learning word, a word that implies you have been taught…

God want you to know, to really know that he loves you. PAUSE

Here in this story Jesus demonstrates his love in 2 ways.

2 ways that are repeated time and time again throughout our scriptures

and in particular in the person and work of Jesus.

1. God shows his love for us in this – he acts.

He does things.

He gives us what we need.

At times that is a miraculous intervention,

mostly it includes the many many blessings of life,

But always… always… he has loved us and continues to love us by giving the greatest gift of all. Jesus.

It is why Christmas is such a wonderful time of the year…

not because of food, family and festivities – not to mention presents.

But because at Christmas we remember the presence of Jesus,

God’s greatest gift who never leaves us or abandons us.

1. God’s love for us is best seen in what we come to know.

What he teaches us.

Consider a new Christian – someone who has just come to understand for the first time the love and acceptance of the Father God…

the deep joy and transforming power of this knowledge is all consuming,

all sustaining, all empowering.

Or consider someone who has continued to grow in their knowledge of God.

This knowledge gives them a deep confidence that carry’s them through the ups

and downs of life. All its challenges and difficulties,

a deep peace and joy which helps them live their lives to the full

and a deep sense of hope which enables them to live with purpose.

We hear something of this in Paul’s prayer for the Colossians: *And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. (Col 1:9-12)*

My father was like this – he knew Jesus and spent his life getting to know Him better

As a result - in life he lived it to the full for the sake of others

As his health and facilities declined, he never complained

but always gave evidence to his deep knowledge of God’s love

And as he faced death – there was no fear. Only gratitude and hope.

Gratitude for the life he had lived and hope for the life which was to come.

My father lived knowing the love of God – First experienced when he received God’s free gift of salvation and became his child

And constantly growing as he learned more and more of God and his ways.

It is my desire that I would follow in His footsteps

And my prayer that you to would experience, know and grow in God’s deep love for you.

Because when you do – then however life turns out, whatever life throws at you…

You will be able to live confidently in the fullness of God’s love and delight for you.