

Sunday 21 July - Eighth Sunday after Trinity

Sermon by Harold Toms

An audio recording of the sermon will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

Over the last few weeks our Gospel readings have covered chapter 6 in Mark's Gospel. It started, a few weeks back with Jesus in His home town where, you may recall, the people took offence at Him. They just couldn't see how someone who had grown up in their community could possibly be this person teaching with wisdom and authority. It's sort-of understandable, those we have known for a long time, and think we know all about, might surprise (and even offend) us when they turn out to be quite different to what we had thought we knew about them. Jesus then sends His disciples out in pairs with very specific instructions to go unprepared for a journey and to call people to repentance, to cast out spirits, and to heal the sick. Presumably while they were away doing this, we had last week's Gospel story about the death of John the Baptist. This week, after that tragic and upsetting interlude, we hear about the disciples return when they tell Jesus all about what they had done and taught. The disciples must have been exhilarated by their experience, whilst at the same time exhausted from all their exertions, so Jesus tries to take them away to somewhere quiet to rest.

Presumably because of the work done by the disciples many see them going, recognise them, and follow, so instead of finding somewhere quiet to rest they find themselves amongst a huge crowd which, when Jesus sees the crowd, He has compassion for them because they are:

"like sheep without a shepherd" Mark 6:14

So instead of sending them away (as the disciples ask Him to do) Jesus begins to teach them, them (in a part of the story that was cut from today's reading) He feeds them - the famous story of the five loaves and two fish. Our reading this morning then continues as Jesus and His disciples cross over the lake (the Sea of Galilee) to a place called Gennesaret. Here, we are told, people at once recognise Him and rush about the whole region bringing

the sick to Him, we are told this happened everywhere He went, with people just touching the fringe of His cloak in order to be healed.

In these early chapters of Mark's Gospel there is a tremendous sense of urgency. In the space of what must have been just a few weeks, Jesus visits many places, and teaches and heals thousands of people, not to mention all the many people encountered by the pairs of disciples. Taken as a whole, these chapters really convey the excitement of Jesus' mission, and the wide variety of different people He goes to. Today, we have heard about the people of Gennesaret, but earlier we hear about people from Geresia/Gadara, the Decapolis, Nazareth, all over the region. Right at the start of Mark's Gospel it is clear that Jesus is taking the good news to all manner of people, not just His Jewish country-men and -women.

In many ways this was what was so radical about Jesus' mission and perhaps what caused the people in Nazareth and the Jewish authorities to take against Him. It is a step-change in scripture, as revolutionary (if not more so) than that moment in the Old Testament when the people of Israel receive the revelation that there is but one true God. They had taken this astonishing teaching (at the time pretty much everyone believed in an absolute multitude of gods) and kept it to themselves as a special people chosen by God. Now Jesus is delivering the message that no, God is not just the God of one nation but, a God for all the nations.

Paul, in our Epistle reading this morning, expands on this as he tells the Ephesians that Jew and Gentile (a word that just means non-Jew) have been reconciled through Christ. Paul tells us that:

"His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross" Ephesians 2: 15-16

It is such a radical message that even those who were Jesus' followers, who saw Him taking His message to Jew and non-Jew alike, who actually witnessed that act of reconciliation on the cross, still found hard to accept and believe. Peter, for example, who had been at Jesus side throughout His ministry and then had witnessed the Holy Spirit poured out on to Gentiles in the house of the Roman Centurion Cornelius, still had to be reprimanded by Paul when he had stopped eating with the Gentiles in Antioch (Paul gives an account of this in his letter to the Galatians).

We too, need to remember always just how important this is, that the Church is for everyone. We must never allow Christ's Church to become divided, especially along racial lines, but also any other man-made differences that cause us to cease to be the united body of Jesus. For that is what the Church is, Jesus' body on earth. Here to continue His work of caring, of healing (the Greek word commonly used in the Gospels can also be translated as "saving") and of teaching the divine truths that Jesus taught His disciples. Paul writes about how Jesus came and preached peace to those who were far away and peace to those who were near. That message of peace is one that we can clearly see the world, our country and all countries needs more than ever, as Paul tells us: through him we all have access to the Father by one Spirit. It is a message that the Church is called to continually re-present to the world, indeed the very purpose for the existence of the Church. I don't think I could find any words to express this mission better than those Paul uses in his letter to the Ephesians:

"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." Ephesians 2: 19-22

Amen.