

## Reflection on Matthew 14:13–21

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As we waited for someone to join our gathering for prayer on Tuesday night, we had a brief check-in to see how we were travelling, especially given the concerning COVID situation. In response to my query, someone answered simply, "Ten-thousand people died today..." His comment, whether precise or not, fell weighty in the middle of our circle.

To be honest, as comforting as I find prayer, in those moments I wondered if it was enough. Looking down at the A5 sheet in my hand, what we were about to do seemed so small in the face of the gravity of these days. Looking up, I saw that two of the six tea lights had fizzled out on the table mirroring my own tentativeness, and yet, prayer was all I had to offer. So, I began with the assurance: *Jesus saw a great crowd and he had compassion for them.*

Compassion is a word that is tossed around quite a bit, especially in regards to how we "should" feel about and respond to harshness in our world. As it is commonly understood, showing compassion for someone we pass by who is experiencing homelessness means we ignore the alarms the situation might trigger in us—alarms about systemic injustice, the lasting impacts of trauma or the awareness of our own vulnerability and maybe even guilt. We quell these and other hard feelings with what might be essentially pity and we toss gold coin in a hat on the footpath. Sometimes though, when used in this way, compassion can result in a dampening down of its greatest potential.



In its New Testament usage, compassion is a visceral word. It includes the rumbling or quivering of the organs in the body. Not just any organ, mind you, but the organs that matter (in the minds of the ancient Greeks) when it comes to being people of soulful wisdom.

Compassion is a full-bodied response that comes upon us uncoerced and uncontrived. It is a gift and, if we follow it all the way through, compassion leads to a deep connection—even if it's only for a moment—rather than simply an action that relieves tension or fulfils some ethical imperative.

As Karen Armstrong, author of *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* puts it, compassion "dethrones the ego from the centre of our lives and puts others there, breaking down the carapace of the selfishness that holds us back from an experience of the sacred." In other words, when genuine compassion is at play, when we allow our eyes to warm in the midst of suffering or our stomachs to burn because of unfairness, the walls between ourselves and others dissolve and, for a time, a simple union exists. We realise that in and between us, the sacred is there.

The thought that in seeing our suffering, Jesus is moved in this way is remarkable, I think. It presents the possibility that his love for us might not flow from one who is more powerful, standing over us and dispensing goods and services from a distance. Instead, then and now, Jesus is impacted by what is happening in the world and comes alongside us in spirit. Through this heart-to-heart relationship, we encounter One who suffers *with us*, who is *with and for us* as a friend and companion. In my experience, it is the *with-ness* that truly matters. For it is our union with the Source of Love that gives birth to graces such as healing, liberation, ennoblement and inner peace.

It occurs to me that if the with-ness of God matters to us, then maybe it is our with-ness with others that matters as well. (Maybe they are interrelated, in fact.) I think of an exchange Sean and I had this week when he was sharing a concern that was on his heart. I listened and, when he stopped talking, I offered my thoughts on the matter—wise thoughts, of course. Sean gently interrupted with, "I just want you to *be here* with me, not give advice."

In her book *Holy Listening*, Margaret Gunther writes:

We are hungry, and we don't know for what. We want something, but we can't name it. The parish is taking good care of us, nourishing us with word and sacrament, just as the hospital made sure that Mrs. G was fed, nursed, and medicated. But we want something else, something more: we want to be touched, we want to be known as children of God.

Compassion expressed in with-ness, the kind of visceral, fulsome presence that makes a difference, may require a change in mindset for us. We've been conditioned by a culture that values the tangible and practical. We measure success according to acquisition and countable things. Even the worthwhileness of the UnitingCare Emergency Relief ministry is based in many people's minds on how many "clients" have been seen, how many meals have been served, how much food has been given away.

It is easy for us to fall into the trap of focusing on the material/measurable stuff and to pour our efforts into them. Doing so often causes us to miss opportunities for simple with-ness and compassion. I'm hopeful that these months have unveiled both our need for and cherishing of being touched—physically and emotionally—and knowing the preciousness of life.

A conversation with one of our friends who comes in during the week brought this home to me after her beloved pet died. She was obviously upset and, even though she held a number to go into the Community Care room, she explained that she came to St. Andrews that day because she knew she would find a listening ear. "It's not really about the food," she confided as she shared her appreciation for the community of which she feels a part.



It can be hard to believe that our loving presence is enough. Like the disciples in the Gospel who are directed by Jesus to give the crowds something to eat, our feelings of scarcity, self-diminishment or even greediness cause us to say, "We have nothing here."

But of course, there is *something*—five loaves and two fish—and like our humble prayer on Tuesday night, *it is enough* because ultimately it is not only about the food, or the bread and fish, or the A5 paper with prayers written on it. It is about our lives, blessed and broken open, which God has given to us to share. And in our sharing, an outpouring of abundant grace is revealed.

*This song crossed my desk this week and, to me, it invites an openness to all that is—a necessary ingredient in compassion and with-ness. It is written and performed by Scottish artist Mike Scott.*

Open to the world  
Open to spirit  
Open to the changing wind  
Open to touch  
Open to nature  
Open to the world within  
Open to change  
Open to adventure  
Open to the new  
Open to love  
Open to miracles  
Open Beloved to You  
Open to learn  
Open to laughter  
Open to being blessed  
Open to joy  
Open to service  
Open to saying "Yes!"  
Open to risk  
Open to passion  
To peace and silence too  
Open to love  
Open to beauty  
Open Beloved to You

Listen to a recording at:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=feAp\\_Bsst24](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=feAp_Bsst24)