

Matthew 25.31-40

- I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.
- For me the clear message from today's gospel is that we have a God with a real bias towards those going through difficult circumstances.
- In fact His concern for the underdog can be found throughout the bible
 - From Israelites in Egyptian slavery, through the prophets
 - and then particularly in the person of Jesus, through whom God reveals his nature to us in the form of a fellow human being
- And Jesus isn't there just for some deserving, worthy types who have fallen on hard times- Far from it
- Look thru gospels , consider the people he makes time for-
 - the adulteress being stoned, ungrateful lepers,
 - despised tax collectors like Matthew and Zaccheus,
 - a Samaritan woman who seemed unable to hold a marriage down,
 - even a daft young couple incapable of planning their own wedding party properly.
- The thrust of his parables and teaching emphasises this further-

- Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd who will go to any lengths for the lost sheep, who choose to wander off
 - regardless of whose fold they belong in, he will be out there, seeking for them
- He doesn't offer us a God who grudgingly tolerate returning prodigals, but one who welcomes them home with open arms
 - a loving Father who simply wants the best for each and every single one of us.
 - the God who is author of new beginnings-
- Not that he is ever fooled by how things have got in this mess, nor ignoring it.
 - But rather than crush and destroy, God's response is to enter the situation in the person of Jesus and to redeem it.
 - Transforming to how it should be, the state which Jesus refers to as his Kingdom,
 - the "Re"creation where injustice and selfishness has no place.
- The good news, the gospel Jesus brings isn't just pie in sky of some golden future, but rather a kingdom he has started to bring in by becoming part of our humanity, one he wants to draw all into

- Today we celebrate harvest, a time of things come to fruition, plenty for all- that's great and we should be grateful and enjoy that
 - and yet we don't have to look far to see how lop sided our situation is, with many others round us still in need
- So what does today's reading say? - See, care and respond.
 - In Jesus eyes, the person who is lonely or down, needs a friend,
 - the guy in prison needs to know society hasn't wiped them out
- And when someone is desperately short of cash to buy food for whatever reason, then can we honestly say we are part of God's kingdom if we pass by on the other side of the road?
- This was sort of challenge that led the churches in our area to form a Food Bank,
 - not standing back from the world, nor preaching at it
 - Instead demonstrating God's love through practical action to a real local issue
- In broad terms the Food Bank operates across what could be called Morpeth Deanery- 66,000 people in the towns of Morpeth, Ashington, Newbiggin and then the community beyond

- up to Longhorsley, Widdrington, Hadston & south to Stannington.
- There are so many reasons to need emergency help,
 - often this can be when personal circumstances change -
 - For those depending on state benefits, this can lead to delays that take time to resolve.
 - But we also encounter increasing number of employed people genuinely struggling to feed their families in the face of rising prices compounded with wages and hours being cut
- It is sometimes easy to forget that locally we are the privileged ones-
 - in fact this area has 6 of the 9 places with the lowest median incomes across the whole of Northumberland.
 - In terms of pockets of child poverty, the former district of Wansbeck is ranked amongst one of the most deprived districts in England.
- Most of us here have reserves to tide us through
 - but if you are one of less fortunate, struggling to make ends meet, then it can only take a couple of unexpected bills to push you into a real crisis or a spiral of debt

- We've learned quite a bit since we opened the first weekly session on Thursday mornings in Ashington almost 2 years ago.
- Things quite slow at first- It took a while to get the word out, but the demand just keeps on growing-
 - We are now handing out food parcels to feed around 230 people every month, ie approaching 3000 occasions someone is given a 3 day supply of food annually.
- Sadly this growth in demand shows no sign of abating in the current climate, so if we are going to survive as a viable service the Food Bank needs to keep finding new resources
- It is quite a challenge- finding 3 days of food
 - At 3 meals per day, on 3000 occasions, somehow we need to be sourcing and distributing 27000 meals per year.
 - Anyone got some loaves and fishes?
- To ensure that we are getting food to the right people, we only provide food for people sent to us by care agencies , such as the Citizens Advice Bureau, doctors, Health Visitor, the children's centres, Job Centre Plus and the Salvation Army, Bernicia, ISOS housing, Social Services and the Community Mental Health teams, *Northumberland's emergency help line NETS*,

- Way it works is that people in need can get a form from referrer, then exchange it for 3 days supply of food at any one of our 7 weekly sessions
- Clearly we are only a stopgap, one link in the chain
 - But as all our clients come through referrers, we know that they are in contact with others better equipped than ourselves as they tackle the underlying causes of their problems
- We started with distribution centres in Morpeth Ashington and Newbiggin, as vast majority of residents in our operating area live in or very close to these towns
 - If no money for food, then not going to be finding bus fares!
- To reach smaller outlying communities we have recently started weekly sessions in Pegswood and Lynemouth, and in November will open in Widdrington
 - We have deliberately expanded slowly rather than leap in and cause bigger problems.
- Up to now we have obtained food supplies in two main ways-
 - through items donated at churches and the like – harvest gives real boost
 - and by the two big local supermarkets, Asda and Morrisons allowing us to hold collections so

that customers buy few extras and then hand them over to us as they leave the shop.

- And in the first year we were able to build up good stocks in this way.
- But as the work has developed we are now past that tipping point where the tins and cans going out exceed those being donated.
 - We are now issuing twice as much food out as what we receive.
 - So we have to raise funds to bulk purchase the shortfall.
- Local councils, churches and charities provide some of that money, but to keep going we do need to build up a group of individuals, supporting us by regular financial giving
 - £15 a month for example would certainly enable us to provide a 3 day foodbag for one more needy person every month.

<show photo on screen>

- This photo was taken earlier in the month of empty shelves in our warehouse. At that point our stock levels had fallen to 1.8 tonnes 40% of which was baked beans and dried pasta.
- there was about two or three weeks food left to distribute. Quite scary really

- Now situation is easing for short time as schools and churches provide us with the output of the Harvest Festival.
- But the Food Bank cannot base its survival on a single annual event like Harvest.
- So please do consider whether you would be prepared to support us regularly –however little, however much, it all helps.
- I joked about loaves and fishes, but in doing this as churches together we are trying to simply follow Jesus' call to be there for those in need.
 - Sometimes it is easy to be overfaced by the enormity of the challenges- certainly no easy ride
 - Getting enough food or money to buy it is a constant concern
 - So is having sufficient and suitable volunteers to keep the 2 or 3 tonnes of items flowing into our warehouse and out to our distribution points.
 - At the moment we are relying too much on people in their late 60s and older to do this.
 - It would make a huge difference if other younger people could offer an hour or two on a regular basis

- And finally we do need to bolster the management side of the project to reduce the load on Linda
- Yet time after time when we seem about to hit the wall, a way forward presents itself
 - I can only put that down to those of you who are holding us in God's care through prayer
- Prayer answered or pure chance?
 - Well as William Temple famously put it, "I've noticed that when I pray coincidences happen and when I don't, they don't"
 - And surely that is the way it should be,
 - Yes we are called to do all that we can to feed the hungry, tend the sick, be a neighbour,
 - but we have limits- at some point we need to place the outcomes in God's hands.
 - Jesus teaches us not to get overfaced with worries but to bring our issues and concerns to the Father who knows just what we need.
 - Through prayer we remain in communion with the One who is ultimately in control
 - He is delighted to entrust us with a role in his purposes, but sometimes we need to

humbly accept that we are not the whole answer

- For God is good, loving and can be trusted- we might not see the big picture, but God does. His good purposes will prevail.

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- So when the Food Bank gets the daily bread required to keep the show on the road, when we make the contacts we need, when a new volunteer offers to fill a gap in our team, then it is something to thank God for.
- So to all of you who have been God's answer to our prayers the channel of His grace for our needs – thank you
 - you don't realise just how important that can be, just how much you are being Christ
 - for you are not only a blessing to the hungry we work with, but also to us as we try to keep the wheels on this particular ambulance
- Can I close with one final thought- and again it is about blessing.
 - today's gospel passage actually comes from a section where Jesus has pulled his disciples together to teach them as a group, his embryo of a church.

- He was building them up for a challenging future with a common understanding and purpose , a sense of being united as his team- his brothers and sisters.
 - As we found in today's verses that identity is expressed through care
- This was a message the first disciples took on board
 - .In Acts of the Apostles we find the church expressing its unity through care for those who were poor and disadvantaged.
 - Paul writes to the Corinthian church asking them to give support to the poorer church in Jerusalem
- Well I feel that through this Food Bank project we have discovered some of that unity of purpose across parishes and denominations in our area
- From the outset this hasn't been some Methodist thing or just an Anglican one – we are all in it together.
 - The Ashington and Newbiggin distribution centres are in Anglican parish halls
 - Morpeth's is in the Pentecostal New Life Christian Centre
 - The Catholic congregation at St Aidan's have felt called to concentrate their collections on whatever we tell them we are particularly short of at the time- and they are incredibly faithful in responding.

- And in doing something together, a foot-washing gift to the community, showing rather than saying we value our neighbours we have found ourselves blessed as well
- For surely it gives us a fresh sense of unity, a better understanding of how we can be the joined up Body of Christ to which we are all called.
- So thanks to all of you who continue to support and encourage us,-
 - please don't stop, we really, really do need you
- but lets especially thank God for giving each one of us the privilege of a role in his work of transformation,
 - creating the coming Kingdom