

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 6th Sunday after Trinity

7th July 2024

All Saints' Marseile

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

The late Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu, who campaigned against racism during the apartheid era in South Africa, once commented that whenever people said to him that religion should stay out of politics 'because they don't mix', it made him wonder which Bible they were reading. We are in a season of parliamentary elections in France and the UK, in both cases heralding significant change, while the forthcoming presidential election in the US is never far from the news. What do our Bible readings today have to say to us at this time of political upheaval?

Our Lectionary (the programme of scriptural readings shared by Roman Catholic, Protestant and Anglican churches) sets two possible Old Testament readings each Sunday. We tend to use the one known as the 'related' reading, chosen by the Lectionary compilers because it bears some relation to the Gospel of the day. Today's reading from Ezekiel is the 'related' reading, but if we had taken the other one from the Second Book of Samuel, we would have heard of David becoming king of all Israel and making a covenant with his people. It's a text that raises questions of what it means to be the new leader of a nation, how they might unite a people who have been divided for a generation, what it means to have a vocation to a role that carries heavy responsibility. These are

good questions to reflect on as a new leader takes office in the countries we call home.

But today we have stayed with Ezekiel, for it too offers scope for reflection on the world of politics. On Friday morning, a significant group in the United Kingdom were left asking the question: what went wrong? And tomorrow morning in France a significant group (albeit a different one) will be asking the same question. Whenever an election results in a shift in the political landscape, people find themselves the next day out of a job, carrying a vision for society that has been rejected by those they sought to persuade.

‘What went wrong?’ is also the basic question behind the Old Testament. It was written in the years after 600 BC when the people of ancient Israel were in exile from the promised land following the destruction of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon. From their exile in Babylon, as they collected together the stories and traditions that made up their history, they reflected both on the disaster and on the ways God was still with them. They found, paradoxically, that they felt closer to God in exile than they had in prosperity.

In the Book of Ezekiel, the answer given to the question ‘what went wrong?’ is that it was because the people were ‘a rebellious house’: they had not kept the covenant with God. Yet Ezekiel is aware that his message will fall largely on deaf ears. All he can hope for is that at least ‘they shall know there has been a prophet among them’. For a politician facing electoral wilderness this week, those words might offer some consolation.

A consoling message is also to be found in our Epistle this morning. 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' It's a reading for those who have suffered disappointment. People who thought they were going to be elected but who found that more people had voted for someone else. People having to adjust to a new reality. That applies not just to politicians but to anyone who has suffered a setback – through illness, loss of employment, loss of purpose. It's a reminder that Christianity isn't about the strong, the powerful, the successful or the sorted. It's about the reality of weakness, oppression, failure and mess. The way we respond to failure and disappointment can let the light of Christ shine through us just as much as if we are one of the outwardly powerful or successful.

If you ask people why they are Christian, you might be surprised how often they talk about times of challenge and tragedy rather than success or celebration. We still find ourselves closer to God in exile than while we are in the promised land. Closer to the cross, which turns out not to be the end of the story. For the New Testament, like the Old, was written by a people coming to terms with catastrophe – that of the crucifixion – yet who were finding that in Jesus's resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit they were in a different story from the one they had supposed.

Our Gospel reading from Mark begins when Jesus returns home to Nazareth after the success of the beginning of his ministry around the shores of Lake Galilee. There he comes up against the narrow expectations of village and family, a resistance that has both an individual and a social dimension: 'Is not this the carpenter?' But it's not just the 'offence of the familiar' that he encounters. People are also unhappy about his prophetic message. In Luke's

account, the local mood turns sour when Jesus suggests how God's love extends to ethnicities and social classes many thought were displeasing to God. It is Jesus's determination to act as a prophet - challenging the status quo, calling out the narrow-minded religiosity of the authorities – that gets him into trouble, and not just in Nazareth. This scene is a precursor of the final act in Jerusalem.

But Jesus is not discouraged by his rejection. He continues his ministry of teaching and healing. His rejection is an important lesson for the disciples in preparation for their own mission. And it is at this point that he sends them out in pairs to proclaim the coming kingdom of God, to encourage those they meet to have a change of heart (which is what repentance means). If their hearers don't want to listen, the disciples are to shake the dust from their feet and move on.

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What will become of them, I wonder? Those who weren't elected on Thursday in the UK or today in France. The answer is that it's not the end of their story. 'Shake the dust from your feet' can sometimes be good advice to someone who has done all they can in a situation – a political role, a job or a relationship - but has ultimately been rejected. It is often our failures that teach us more than our successes. Being given a second chance is what the Christian faith is profoundly about. As one commentator has put it:

'The consistent theme [of the Bible] is that God takes the person who has been overlooked, the one who has been beleaguered, the figure who is an outsider or a failure; finds in that person a quality neither they nor the

world recognised, and in the power of the Spirit, transforms that person into something no one dreamed or imagined.’¹

Like the disciples, all of us go into God’s future with open hands, trusting in him, taking very little with us. But we do so in the knowledge that Christ secured our salvation by opening his hands wide on the cross, and that the story didn’t end there. If we can bring ourselves to imitate that surrender to God’s unknown but extraordinary future, we will find ourselves upheld by those arms, throughout our lives and beyond.

That’s a message of hope for anyone who may be feeling disappointment today. Who says religion and politics don’t mix?

Amen.

Sermon – 7th Sunday after Trinity – Sea Sunday

14th July 2024

Eglise du Sacré-Coeur, Oppède

Christine Portman, Reader

A common thread runs through this morning’s readings. One theme is the sea: of course, because today is Sea Sunday. But these texts also reflect fear and hope, certainty and uncertainty, and they’re issues we’ll come back to as we look more closely at them. But on this special day we’re remembering seafarers and their families, and all those in peril on the sea, particularly because our chaplaincy is so generously supported by the Mission to Seafarers. Members of our Marseille congregation work alongside the team from the Association Marseillaise d’Accueil des Marins - the Seamen’s club on the impressive port. The services they offer are a lifeline to seafarers - men and women who are often

¹ The Revd Dr Sam Wells, Sermon given at St Martin-in-the Fields, London, 16th June 2024.

very poorly paid and find themselves at sea for months, unable to step down or contact family or friends.

But the seafarers we heard about this morning hardly grab our sympathy. *In an attempt to escape from the ship, the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea, pretending they were going to lower some anchors from the bow. Then Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, "Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved." So the soldiers cut the ropes that held the lifeboat and let it drift away.*

Can you imagine the scene? A stormy night, the boat *being driven across the Adriatic Sea*; the terror of those on board, sensing the rocks all around them and hearing the pounding waves on an unseen shore. Fearing for their lives. When the boat finally founders and the stern breaks up, only the centurion, *who wanted to spare Paul's life*, comes out of the story with any kind of honour, but maybe he was afraid of punishment if he allowed his chief prisoner to escape? After all, we believe Paul was a Roman citizen and we know he was on his way to Rome to face charges.

And again, in today's psalm we read of *those who go down to the sea in ships*, their utter panic in the face of a storm, and of God's calming the waters as he brings them *in safety to the haven*. Then in the gospel reading there's the account of the stilling of the storm. We see more fear and dread, as the disciples' boat is caught up in one of the famously *furious squalls* on the Sea of Galilee. In the reading from the Book of Job, the Lord speaks to him out of the storm, mocking him for his pride:

*'Who is this that obscures my plans
with words without knowledge?*

Brace yourself like a man;

*I will question you,
and you shall answer me.*

'Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?

Tell me, if you understand.

Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!'

This passage reminds us of how often we humans are guilty of thinking we have the answers to difficult questions. It's a good reminder of the need for humility. All our knowledge is as nothing in the light of God's unknowable immensity.

As I prepared to speak to you today and read all the accounts of fearful people in foundering boats, I couldn't help but think of the fear and panic driving our increasingly polarized politics, not only in France, but across Europe and indeed, the wider world. There are many who seek simple answers to extremely complex questions, who sadly fail to look deeply into the malaises affecting their own societies, instead pointing accusing fingers elsewhere. Their targets are so often the millions worldwide, fleeing dictatorships, torture, war and grinding poverty, women and men seeking nothing more than a decent life for themselves and their families. Last year more than 3,000 men women and children drowned in the Mediterranean alone, often on dark and stormy nights, sometimes left to die by the unscrupulous gangs who exploit their misery, or even worse, driven to their deaths by the boats of those legally obliged to protect them.

And I also wonder would we be sitting here in church today had people not been free to cross borders in Paul's time. He was on his way to Rome to face trial, but he was born in Tarsus – modern day Turkey. His vision of Christ took place on the road to Damascus in what's now Syria. Three years after his conversion, he travelled down to Jerusalem to meet with Peter and the other apostles. He preached tirelessly throughout his own country, founding communities in Ephesus and Colosse and Galatia, but also much further afield to Philippi and Thessalonika, now part of Greece, to Malta and Cyprus and ultimately to his martyrdom at Rome. Where would we be without his marvellous epistles and without the missionary work of all the apostles and saints? Indeed, where would many of our great countries be and what would our own families look like without the constant to and fro of people over hundreds of thousands of years?

On Thursday night, four people drowned in the English Channel, just more figures to add to the 19 who've died in similar circumstances this year – a flimsy inflatable losing air, people without life jackets, men and women who would have parted with enormous sums in order to escape from life on the edge. And these figures pale – but never into insignificance – at the side of the 3015 migrants dead or missing at sea last year.

God's words to Job remind him of his smallness in this great universe, of the power of God who says to the sea: *"This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt"*. And in the gospel reading, in a boat tossed about on the Sea of Galilee, we see God's power at work: the waves are stilled and the storm is calmed. Whilst the disciples panic, Jesus sleeps calmly on a cushion in the stern. He is not steering the boat. He's trusting that they will arrive safely on the other shore. There's a good deal of symbolism here. Yet the

heart of the story lies in his rebuke to the disciples: *'Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?'*

In his life on earth, our Saviour unceasingly preached of the need to love one another. His parables so often carry the message of caring for the stranger, having respect for the other. In the Sermon on the Mount, a clear message from the Beatitudes is this: *'If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.'* (Matthew 5.46-48)

Jesus calls us to step away from our fears, and instead follow his Great Commandment to love one another. We humans want knowledge, we hanker after certainty and security, we want our opinions to be right - but our understanding is imperfect: we can never capture the whole picture. Jesus acknowledges human weakness and offers a more perfect way. He asks us to walk in his footsteps, putting our complete trust and faith in God's goodness as we accept his Way of love. Amen

Sermon – 7th Sunday after Trinity – Sea Sunday

14th July 2024

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Assistant Chaplain

Today, being the second Sunday in July, many churches around the world mark Sea Sunday. This is, of course, an occasion to celebrate the bounty of God's creation, marvel at the natural beauty of the sea, and give thanks for its gifts. However, Sea Sunday goes beyond this picturesque view. It focuses on the often-overlooked lives of seafarers, those called to 'go across to the other side', who navigate the vastness of the seas and might face isolation, danger, and arduous conditions.

Today, we heard readings that exemplify how the Scriptures talk about the sea and seafarers. God addresses Job from a whirlwind, recapitulating the story of the Creation and highlighting the mastery of the waters of chaos. In the Psalm, sailors, for whom God calms a tempest, respond with gladness for their deliverance. We also heard a vivid account from the Acts of the Apostles, where

Paul is caught in a winter storm off the coast of Crete, and ultimately shipwrecked and cast ashore on the island of Malta. And, of course, we heard one of the most dramatic and beloved stories in the New Testament: Jesus stilling the storm.

Our chaplaincy in Marseille has long served the seafarers who came ashore in our city, gaining insight into their difficult, dangerous and lonely lives. Today, ships are vastly different from those of St Paul's day. Cargo ships, super tankers, roll-on/roll-off car carriers, luxury cruise liners criss-cross the oceans equipped with sophisticated navigation instruments. Yet life on board remains tough and often dangerous. Seafarers often endure extreme weather conditions, and their occupation is one of the world's most perilous, with piracy, shipwreck and abandonment among the threats they face. And what about the months-long voyages so many international seafarers undertake, leaving them isolated from loved ones?

Very few people realise how much we rely on seafarers: 90% of the world's trade is carried by sea, involving nearly 2 million seafarers, who operate on 74,000 ships. Yet we hear very little about these people. Does anyone know that they are out at sea, other than their families and friends? When a ship comes into the port, the seafarers might get time ashore, but they are strangers in a strange land. How important, then, is the work of the Mission to Seafarers worldwide? Similarly, here in Marseille, we have the AMAM, *L'Association Marseillaise d'Accueil des Marins*, offering a home from home, a friendly face to talk to, the opportunity to spend quiet time with friends, to get in touch with family.

I have immense respect for all those who, across time, have responded to the call to 'go across to the other side': navigators, seafarers and even migrants who, out of despair, embark on frail boats. Many of them experience the sea, or even a small body of water like the Sea of Galilee, as a challenging place, where life hangs in the balance. They find themselves on a tossed and imperilled ship, sailing on the fearsome and uncontrollable waters whipped up by the wind. Those among them who profess faith may cry out in fear, doubt and abandonment, echoing the cry often repeated in the stories of God's people: 'Do you not care that we are perishing?'

Yet the Gospel story of the stilling of the storm has always been understood to hold a meaning deeper than its literal one. In an age marked by external persecutions and internal controversy and conflict, the early church must have appeared like a boat navigating a stormy sea. The first Christians likely echoed

the desperate plea of Christ's disciples in the boat, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'

The winds of change and the waters of chaos continue to batter the worldwide church and people of faith. In our personal lives, we too face stress and storms, as our individual boats are tossed about by waves of economic uncertainty and change, war, illness, grief, racial and political unrest. As Augustine of Hippo described in one of his sermons, we are 'souls sailing across the sea of this world in a wooden vessel.'² Life can feel overwhelming and out of control. Waves crash, the boat fills up, and we struggle to stay afloat. 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'

'Let us go across to the other side,' Jesus says. Here lies a parable of discipleship: Christians are called to journey with Christ 'to the other side', to cross boundaries. This is never going to be easy. On the other side, uncharted territories await. But what does Christ do after crossing 'to the other side', after crossing many new boundaries - social, cultural and religious? He eats with those deemed unsuitable, challenges Sabbath laws, associates with the 'unclean' and heals them at unconventional times. He opens minds to new possibilities, liberating people to embrace a future of freedom and wholeness. For him, no place is forsaken, and no one is abandoned. Christ reveals that God's kingdom extends to places we might have considered beyond its reach.

The boundaries we are called to cross are as diverse as they are numerous: boundaries of ethnicity, class, status, culture and education. Attempting to navigate these boundaries can be a tempestuous experience. Following Jesus across to the other side does not promise us, whether as individuals or as a church, a life free from storms. Even after weathering these storms, following Jesus may well lead us directly into encounters with the deepest pain and suffering in the world - places where Jesus' word and healing touch are most needed.

In Mark's story, the clear truth is that Jesus is just as present in the raging storm as he was in the soothing calm that followed. At no moment that night was God absent or distant. In that vulnerable boat, amidst the swelling and terrifying waters, the disciples were in Christ's company. He rested in their midst, tossed and soaked as they were tossed and soaked. He journeyed with his disciples through the turmoil.

² Augustine, *Sermon 63*

I hope we will seek the grace to experience God's presence in the storm; the grace to know that he accompanies us in tempestuous situations; the grace to trust that Christ cares, even when we seem to be drowning; the grace to believe in the power of God's love even when he seems to be asleep.

May we respond to this grace with the courage to 'go across to the other side', and always to ask the question grounded in wonder, in life-giving curiosity: 'Who is this man?' In doing so, let us allow Christ to reveal himself to us, ever challenging, ever mysterious, ever new.

Amen.



All Saints' Marseille

21st July 2024

8th Sunday after Trinity

Holy Communion

Sermon

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Assistant Chaplain

"Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile."
This invitation beautifully illustrates Jesus' concern, gentleness, and wisdom. It is particularly striking in the fast-paced Gospel of Mark,

where events unfold ‘immediately’ or ‘at once’, and Jesus moves with unrelenting urgency. Could this be THE Gospel for the 21st century?

The urgency of the Gospel is palpable in today’s passage. Jesus’ disciples have just returned from their first ministry tour, their inauguration into apostleship. They have poured themselves into the mission entrusted to them by Jesus and are both exhilarated and exhausted, eager to share their experiences. Yet, Jesus perceives their tiredness and the need for quietness – needs they may not fully acknowledge themselves. They need not just physical rest, but also respite for their hearts and souls.

Reading Mark’s Gospel from beginning to end, one might picture Jesus as a brisk and efficient Messiah, moving swiftly from his hometown synagogue to village to mountaintop to seaside, amidst a whirlwind of healings, parables, and life-changing encounters. This portrayal may reflect our own tendencies towards busyness and our fear of idleness, serving as a justification for our own hectic lifestyles as we attempt to mirror our Lord.

Yet, if we pause and reflect on this morning’s passage, a different image of Jesus emerges - one who recognises his disciples’ exhaustion and responds with gentle compassion. Notice that instead of reacting to their reports of activity by assigning more tasks, Jesus simply says, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile.” How refreshing this invitation must have been to his weary disciples.

Don’t we all yearn to hear these words from our Lord? Don’t we all long for the invitation to a place where we can rest awhile in the presence of Christ? When we gather around him, we may be tempted to recount all the things we have done, presenting our busyness and

our weariness as if they were worthy of praise and reward. We convince ourselves that our efforts prove our faithfulness as disciples.

Yet, our busyness and weariness reveal the illusion that we control our lives and can reconcile ourselves with God through our actions. God sees beyond these illusions, looking into our hearts to discern our true needs and desires - the deep hungers for space, reflection, solitude, and rest that our work-focused culture often obscures. He invites us to lie down in green pastures, leads us beside still waters, and restores our souls. He gently calls, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile."

In that deserted place, in the company of Christ, we can rediscover ourselves, free ourselves from the grips of anxiety and fear, embrace the quiet, and rejuvenate our hearts from our frenzied lives.

Yet, don't we all know that even the best-laid plans can sometimes falter? According to Mark, Jesus' plan to retreat by boat fails when the crowds anticipate his destination and follow on foot. By the time he and his disciples arrive at their hoped-for refuge, the crowds are already there, and the quiet sanctuary they sought remains elusive.

Does Jesus flee or change course? No. As Mark describes, "as he went ashore, Jesus saw the great crowd and had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd."

To have compassion means to show sympathy, mercy, and loving concern - to suffer alongside others. The original term used in the Gospels is rooted in a word meaning 'guts' and the seat of feelings. That is compassion — a visceral, deep feeling that radiates throughout the body like an adrenaline rush.

John the Dwarf, one of the early Christians known as the Desert Mothers and Fathers, who chose to dwell in the wilderness and spend their life there with Christ, said: “You don’t build the house by starting with the roof and working down. You start with the foundation [which] is our neighbour. The neighbour is where we start.” Everything begins with this vision and hope of putting the neighbour in touch with God in Christ – through our compassion.

For Jesus, compassion is not merely an emotion but an active response. He demonstrated that compassion is fundamental to discipleship; it is both a requirement and an imperative that drives to act for the sake of others.

Yet, only a heart that resists the pull of haste is truly capable of responding with compassion. Those who dedicate their lives to caring for others must first attend to their own well-being.

When Mother Teresa’s letters to her spiritual advisors were published a decade after her death, they revealed the profound inner struggles, despair, doubt, and loneliness she endured despite her dedication to the ‘Lord’s work’. While she lived among the poor and spent her days and nights in service, compassion was far from being straightforward or comfortable. It was forged at great personal cost. This week, as I reflected on today’s Gospel, I wondered whether Mother Teresa had ever been encouraged - or even allowed - to take the time she needed to be refreshed and restored amid the endless desperate petitions, outstretched hands, and unspeakable suffering. I wondered if she ever silenced the voice that gently prompted her to “Come away and rest awhile”, or if she simply postponed such moments of rest until it was too late.

The disciples’ task is twofold: they must attend to everything that cries out for attention and care, while also pausing and paying

attention to their own hearts and the manner in which they live their lives. This week's Gospel reading highlights the essential and ongoing tension between compassion and spiritual self-care. Jesus lived with this tension and taught his disciples how to navigate it as well. Two thousand years later, do we genuinely address this issue with the seriousness it demands?

Is there a lesson for us here? Pope Francis speaks of the need for an 'ecology of the heart,' encompassing rest, contemplation - that is, spending quiet time with God - and compassion. So, on one hand, we should not apologise for needing rest and solitude. On the other hand, we must not let our weariness overshadow our compassion. In a world of persistent and urgent needs, like the apostles, we cannot give from an empty well. To be fully present to our families and friends, work, and ourselves, we must respond to the invitation to a quiet space and time. By entrusting our burdens to Christ, even if only for a little while, we will find restoration.

Hear his voice, calling us into perfect peace - the peace only Christ can give: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

Amen.

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 9th Sunday after Trinity

28th July 2024

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

A few years ago I had the privilege of sharing in a Eucharist beside Lake Galilee, next to the church said to mark the spot where Jesus fed five thousand from five loaves of bread and two fish. (At the top of your service sheets you will see the mosaic of bread and fish that's set into the floor of the church.) It was a moving service, not least because it connected the story in our Gospel reading with the Eucharist itself. For the two things were, it seems, connected in the mind of the Gospel writers.

In his book *The Meaning in the Miracles*, Jeffrey John (the former Dean of St Alban's and now Assistant Chaplain at St George's, Paris) begins by recalling two Religious Education teachers from his youth, Mr Davies and Miss Tomkins, and their different approaches to teaching the faith. Mr Davies was a literalist, instructing his pupils that the Bible should be taken at its plainest meaning. If it says that Jesus walked on water, then that is what happened. Doubting it effectively meant doubting the divinity of Christ. Miss Tomkins, who had 'Modern Views', was a reductionist, and liked to dismiss anything in the Bible that sounded supernatural. She suggested that when Jesus fed the five thousand, what really happened was that he and the disciples shared their own loaves and fish with those nearest them; and then others, seeing their example of unselfishness, were inspired to share what they had too, so there was enough for everyone.

Jeffrey John points out that, whilst the two approaches may seem different, both actually treat the miracle stories in a similar way, as though they were straightforward descriptions of what happened. Miss Tomkins looked for worldly explanations, while Mr Davies was happy with supernatural ones. But

they were both, in John's view, missing the point, which was that the stories handed down in the Gospels are a literary creation with a theological purpose. At least three of the Gospels were written by Jewish authors, familiar with the literary technique of *Haggadah* (which means narrative). This was a type of creative theological writing that started with a text from Scripture and meditated on it freely, showing how a prophecy was being fulfilled, using symbolism to create a new story that applied to the present day the truths, hopes and meanings of the scriptural past.

Thus, when Jesus walks across water as though on dry land, the hearers were encouraged to think: 'This is the new Moses'. Like Moses, Jesus sits the people down in companies and feeds them with miraculous bread from heaven in such abundance that baskets are left over. (In case the hearers haven't twigged, St John adds: 'Now the Passover was near.' This is a new Exodus.) Jesus's actions also point to Elisha, specifically the story in our Old Testament reading from the Second Book of Kings, when Elisha takes an army of men into the desert and feeds them miraculously with a few loaves. (A clue lies in the word 'barley', which appears only in St John's version, echoing the Elisha story.)

And so, if nothing else, this story is telling us that in recalling what Moses did Jesus is fulfilling the Law, and in recalling what Elisha did Jesus is fulfilling the Prophets. He is the one whom the Law and the Prophets foretold: the long-expected Messiah.

That's one layer of meaning, but there are more. The story presents Jesus as the ultimate fulfilment for humanity, offering a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, the traditional image of paradise. There's also a symbolic layer: bread

was often a symbol for the word of God, and there is symbolism in the numbers – twelve baskets for the twelve tribes. Then there’s a sacramental layer: early Christians hearing this story would have spotted references to their new eucharistic worship. In the miracle Jesus takes bread, blesses it and breaks it - just like at the Last Supper, just like they were learning to do each week.

All these dimensions of meaning were important to the Gospel writers, and they are important to us as we travel our journey of faith. Hearing the miracles of feeding and healing opens us up to the abundant, healing power of God. Learning what it means to be more open to the world, to one another and to God. Rowan Williams notes that ‘Jesus’s “works of power” were always means of announcing the good news of his transforming love’.

John’s Gospel emphasises how Jesus transforms the people he meets, introducing them to the spiritual dimension of their lives, drawing them from self-centred fearfulness to the reckless abandon of loving one another. ‘I came that they may have life,’ says Jesus, ‘and have it abundantly’ (John 10.10). When the wine runs out at the wedding of Cana, Jesus asks the stewards to bring what they have – simple water, like the five loaves and two fish – and he transforms it, way beyond what they need. We are to bring to Christ what we have, ourselves, and allow him to transform them, so that our lives may be broken open and shared, that through us people may catch a glimpse of God’s unbounded love, the living water that gushes up to eternal life. Our instinctive fear of scarcity overwhelmed by God’s abundant generosity. Five thousand pieces of bread on the mountainside. Six hundred bottles of fine wine at a village wedding. Do this in remembrance of me.

Perhaps, in the end, the thing about the miracle stories is that expand our understanding of what is possible. As the angel said to Mary, nothing is impossible with God. Yet there is double agency involved. God needs our response. Without Mary's 'yes', none of it could have happened. Without the boy's bread and fish, five thousand would not have been fed. Unless the stewards had brought the water, there would never have been wine. However small or useless we feel our contribution to be, we must never underestimate what it can do. Small acts of kindness and generosity can transform another person's life. What matters is not what we are, but rather what by God's grace we may become. It's never too late to begin.

While I was reflecting on all this, I came across this prayer. It's called 'A shocking blessing':

May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers,
half truths, superficial relationships,
so that you will live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger at injustice,
oppression and exploitation of people,
so that you will work for justice, equity and peace.

May God bless you with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain,
rejection, starvation and war.
so that you will reach out your hand to comfort them and change their
pain to joy.

And may God bless you with the foolishness to think that you can make
a difference in the world,
so that you will do the things which others tell you cannot be done.

The miracle is that they can.
Amen.