

Part 1

Have you ever come across something in your life and thought, “That’s too big for me”. When Kate and I were in Positano in Italy just over a week ago we rather realised the challenge of getting anywhere in that beautiful place.

When you are apartment was somewhere near the top of the village [CLICK], and you were at the bottom, you soon realise that those steps are many [CLICK] and many [CLICK] and many [CLICK] – in fact something like 600 steps in total, and suffice it to say we only walked up once. That was just too big for us.

In the last few weeks as we have moved between the King David story and the New Testament we have come across stories that could easily be seen to be too big. David [CLICK] taking on Goliath; Jesus [CLICK] feeding 5.000 men plus women and children.

But you see, what we have also seen over the last few weeks is that nothing is too big for God.

When Kate and I used to help lead a children’s mission week in another church, Kate used to lead the youngest group of children, and I used to lead the band – and we all had great fun singing songs, and dancing along, and many of those songs were reassuring the children that nothing is too big for God. So, before we think about in what ways today’s stories are very big, I thought we’d sing a couple of silly songs which you may or may not know – but will also probably annoyingly stick with you for the rest of the day.

Part 2

When I originally drew up the sermon series that we have been following on King David it had been my intention to spend the whole of today talking about the prophet Nathan, and how Nathan delivered God’s condemnation of David to David over his behaviour towards Bathsheba and Bathsheba’s husband Uriah the Hittite. But now this week, our gospel reading is speaking to me so strongly that what I am going to endeavour to do is to talk about both of the subjects involved, but rather than go into huge details, I want to focus on what they are saying to us, as a church, to us, as individuals, and how both stories are showing us an aspect of the greatness of God, and perhaps reflect briefly on particularly what the gospel is saying to me, today, on this last Sunday before I become rector of these 4 churches.

So, I will therefore need to be succinct – I can but try.

Before our first reading, let me tell you what has just happened. And it is a tough story. It is a story of adultery and murder, as King David decided he wanted a woman he was simply not allowed to have, and then, in order, shall we say, after the event, to marry the woman, he had her husband murdered.

So now in our reading, we hear God’s response.

Part 3

The most wonderful thing about the Christian faith is the love that God has for his people, and that love is what is so immense. It is because of that love that God chooses, and I emphasise chooses because he doesn’t have to, to forgive us when we do something wrong. It is because of that love that God sent his Son to the world to die on a cross, to take on himself the sins that we commit, so that forgiveness is possible. It is because of that love that we are promised that if we believe in his Son we will have eternal life. So that love is truly amazing.

But what this story is telling us is that whilst God will forgive us when we do things wrong, that is not necessarily the end of the story. As Christians, if someone commits a crime against us, we are encouraged to forgive them – but even if we forgive them, and God forgives them – which he will do if they ask, it doesn't mean there will be no punishment. Being forgiven for a crime does not negate the need for whatever punishment the country decides is necessary. Like it doesn't mean we have to allow someone to repeat a crime against us.

And that is exactly what is going on with David here. And it is a terribly hard and painful read.

First, Nathan tricks David into condemning himself with the story of the poor man's lamb. And then Nathan passes on God's judgement. I anointed you King. I saved you from Saul.

I gave you a home., and I gave you wives. I gave you a country – of Israel and Judah, and I would have given you so much more. "Why have you despised the word of the Lord to do what is evil in his sight?"

And yes, God then doles out the punishment. David will never live in peace. The death of their baby. Uprising in David's family. And, perhaps the worst for David's vanity, he will not build the temple. And all those things came true.

Yes, this is Old Testament justice, and I don't believe that is the sort of retribution that God would take today – it just doesn't fit alongside that loving, caring, comforting man that Jesus was, but it is a warning, that we need to ensure that we do all we can to live by God's rules, not what we would like those rules to be. As over the next few years we look to develop our faith together, as we look to develop our relationships with God, we must remember to love the law of God – not all the interpretations of those laws that Jesus so hated and argued with the Pharisees about, but those basic laws that formed so much of Jesus' teaching.

And in a few minutes we will see how Jesus helps us to achieve that.

Part 4

So what is it then that is shouting at me from this reading? I think it is Jesus urging us all to focus on what is important.

The reading starts off with what often happened with Jesus – Jesus was asked a question, but rather than answering it he answered the question the questioner should have been asking. He ignored, "how on earth did you get here" but instead told them why they had come looking for him. And what he is saying is really interesting.

These people had been part of that crowd of something like 10,000 people including women and children who Jesus had somehow fed, from just those 5 barley loaves and 2 small fish. If anyone ever questions to you just how immense God is, just point them to this story – not just what Jesus did, but why – because he cares so much for all of the people of the earth.

They had witnessed an amazing miracle that Jesus had performed, but Jesus now turns on them and tells them what they are looking for is more miracles rather than what is behind those miracles.

So what Jesus is now doing is moving them on from that miracle, using it as an example, and then saying, this is what you should be learning from it.

But was that really necessary? Jesus had performed the miracle so is it not a bit churlish almost to criticise the people for not fully understanding what he was doing? Not surprisingly the answer to that is No. There is a verse at the end of the feeding of the five thousand reading that explains what is

happening. “When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”.

One of the regular misunderstandings of the Jewish people when Jesus came to be among them was that they thought Jesus would be the Messiah they had expected – someone who would come and be a military King, leading them to victory initially over the Roman authorities who had invaded their land, and beyond that to further domination. But that was never going to be the case, and Jesus was very concerned that those people he had fed were going to try and force him to take up the role which he was not supposed to take up. So first he withdrew, and then when the crowd followed him, he had to explain to them why their expectations were, wrong.

Jesus set about telling this crowd that it was not the physical things that he actually did for them that were important, but it was how come he could do those things – in effect, what they had to understand, which they didn't really yet understand, was who Jesus actually was.

And three days before I become rector of these 4 wonderful churches I found this message really pertinent. There are various things that I have been considering suggesting we change, particularly how about we manage our resources, and organise ourselves, but behind all that, what we must never allow to happen is that we forget who it is that we are here for.

Kate and I were fortunate to have a short break in Amsterdam earlier this year visiting one of our daughters who was working there for a couple of months, and we went to the Rijksmuseum – where there is an amazing collection of paintings by the like of Rembrandt and Vermeer. By each of these paintings there was an excellent description of the painting which told you all you needed to know. But unless you took a step backwards and actually looked at the picture for yourself would you really understand the picture.

And that is what Jesus is saying to the crowd. Yes look at the signs – as that is what the miracle of loaves and fishes is – but then make sure you understand the bigger picture, what the sign is pointing to.

And back to the story – and Jesus continues to build on what he did in that miracle. He continues to talk about food, and another miracle, and again pointing to what we should be learning from that miracle.

When the Israelites, under the care and leadership of Moses, were starving as they headed towards the promised land, the Jewish people would tell you that Moses brought them manna from heaven, but Jesus is pointing out that it wasn't Moses, but his father that provided the manna – indeed that his father God gives us all the true bread from heaven, and when the people said, “Sir, give us this bread always” , at that point they had begun to understand.

And the response is one of those lines of Jesus' which almost makes everything else unnecessary. “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

One of the interesting things about a service of induction and institution is that the person being inducted and instituted is, with the exception of leading a time of prayer, by and large told what he or she is to say. Bishop Dagmar will be preaching and Archdeacon Alex will be covering most of the legal parts. So, as this service is, in effect, closing one period of history for these four churches, before I formally take possession of the church buildings on Wednesday, I just wanted to say this.

It has been my privilege and pleasure to serve in these four churches over the last four years.

Under the Rev'd Angela's guidance I have, I hope, learned during my curacy, how to be an incumbent of a multi-parish benefice, and since I became Associate Priest last October, I have had a real opportunity to

determine whether being incumbent here is what God has called me to do. But from Wednesday onwards, I feel I am starting what God has been calling me to do, once the time and place is right, for the last 30 years.

And where I would like to start is with the line that we have just heard. “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” I have talked over the last couple of weeks about how the Kingdom of God is not something we need to create, or to build – it exists and we need to introduce people to it, and to God’s son who showed us what it’s all about. So as we go into this next phase of our churches’ history, let us go with that phrase ringing in our ears.

Amen.