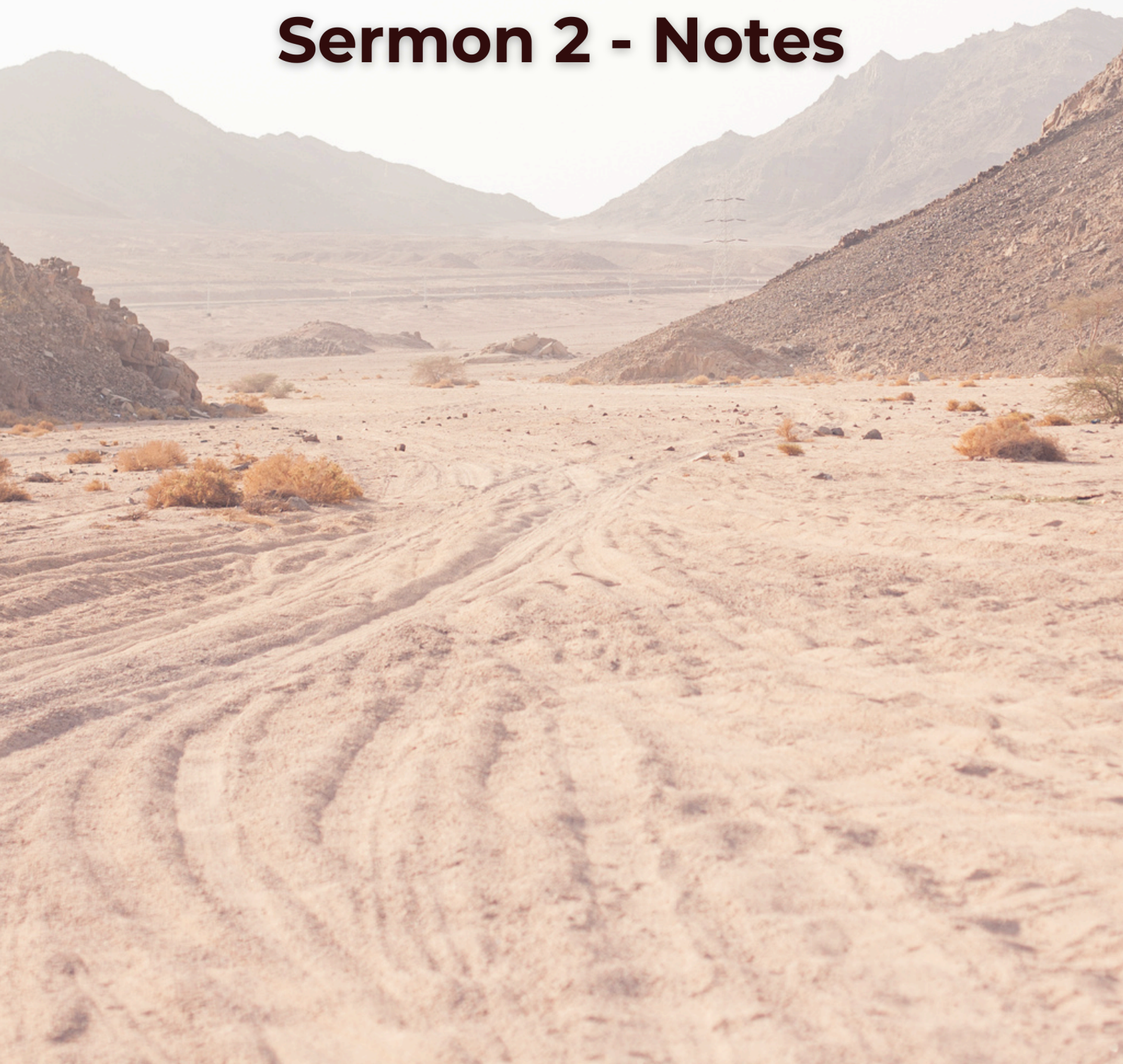


GENEROUS LENT

Sermon 2 - Notes



WEEK TWO: SERMON NOTES GENEROUS LENT

FIRST READING:

Exodus 16:6-15

SECOND READING

2 Corinthians 9:6-8, 10-15

GOSPEL READING

Mark 6:30-44

The Feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle of Jesus found in all four Gospels. It is a story of contrasts: ministry and rest, abundance and scarcity, faith and failure, material need and spiritual hunger. At the heart of the story is a rich picture of what it means to be a steward. The bread the disciples share with the crowd they first receive from Jesus as both blessed and broken.

MANNA AND EUCHARIST

The story carries a rich double meaning for Mark's readers. This is not the first time that God has supplied both physical and spiritual needs in a desert place. The disciples and the hungry crowd, any Jewish readers of Mark's gospel would instinctively recall the gift of manna that fed Israel in the wilderness (Ex 16). At points in the Feeding of the Five Thousand there are clear echoes of that earlier miracle.

More than manna in the wilderness, the Feeding miracle recalls another story, one with which Mark's readers are fully familiar. When Jesus takes, blesses, breaks and shares the bread (Mk 6:41) the framing of the story is influenced by and intentionally reflects the Eucharistic practice of the earliest church (1 Cor 11:23-26). But note also that the simple meal described in Acts 27:35 has the same elements of taking bread, thanking, breaking and eating. At the heart of Christian worship and at the heart of Christian community is a shared meal in which hospitality and relationships matter and where material things carry profound spiritual reality.

The stewardship implications are evident. Generosity is not, of course, a sacrament. But generous giving has a sacramental character; a material gift carrying profound spiritual meaning. So, for Paul, in the Jerusalem offering generous giving is a sign of compassion, of the unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ, of obedience to apostolic authority and ultimately the cause of thanksgiving (*eucharistia*) to God.



THEY REPORTED ALL THEY HAD DONE (6:30)

The feeding miracle is immediately preceded in Mark by the execution of John the Baptist (Mk 6:14-29). However, organically the setting of miracle is connected to the mission of the Twelve in 6:6b-13. This ordering is surely intentional. In his gospel of discipleship Mark captures the insights and the blind spots of those who would follow Jesus. Mark contrasts the mission of the Twelve, sent out with sandals and a staff with the feasting and dancing at court, with Herod's weakness and grisly execution of John. Thus Mark paints the first in a series of vivid contrasts.

In 6:30-32 Mark provides for the Feeding miracle a scene setting introduction. Mk 6:30 is the only time in Mark where the disciples are called 'apostles' or when anyone other than Jesus teaches. The reason seems clear: they are apostles because they are sent by Jesus and they teach what they have learned from their Master.

Here is a further contrast: these apostles and teachers will fail to understand the meaning of the miracle of the loaves. Mark refers back to the miracle in 6:52 and again in 8:17-21. Both of these passages turn on the failure of the disciples to understand the meaning of the miracle. Mark also offers his readers the parallel story of the feeding of four thousand, again referenced in 8:17-21 as a miracle not understood.



COME AWAY AND REST AWHILE (6:31-32)

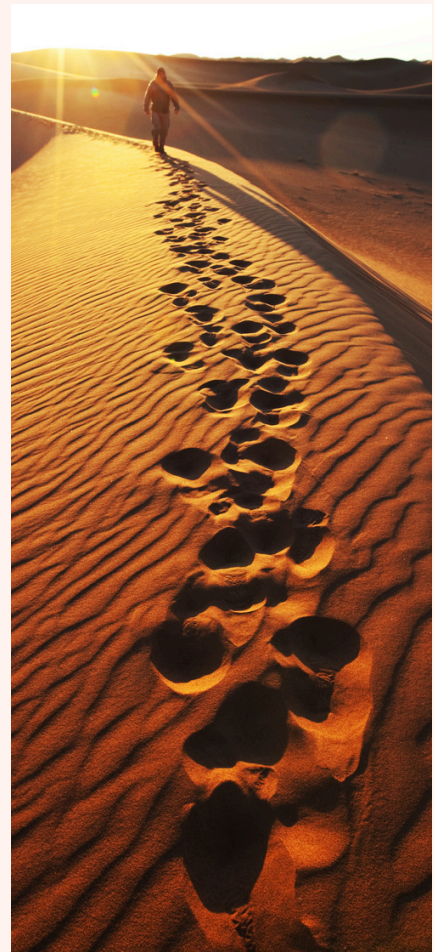


The disciples report on the success of their mission but the crowd is pressing upon them. Only Mark's account puts weight on the invitation to the disciples to rest awhile. He captures the busy scene in his repeated use of 'many' (*polloi* and variants). There are 'many coming and going' (v31), many recognised Jesus (v33) and there was a large crowd (*polys ochlos*) when he arrived and Jesus began to teach many things (*polla*; v34).

Significant also is the phrase in Mark: they did not have time to eat. Mark is setting up another contrast here with the ordered eating of the bread and fish (6:39-40), but we should not miss the significance of the need for physical rest, space and food for exhausted disciples. If we are too busy to attend to the needs of the body (food, rest, recreation, exercise) then we are too busy. Here again is the interplay of the physical and the spiritual worlds. There is no sharp divide of sacred and secular.

Mark uses a pregnant phrase in 6:31: come, by yourselves, to a solitary (*erēmos*, perhaps 'desolate') place. The word is intentional in this passage; Mark repeats it in 6:32 and again in 6:35. It is also the word Mark uses six times in chapter 1: the location of the Baptist's ministry (1:3-4), of Jesus temptations (1:12-13) and the place of private prayer and public ministry (1:34-35). This desert reference is one of the ways in which the miracle of the loaves echoes the Exodus story of God's provision of manna in the wilderness.

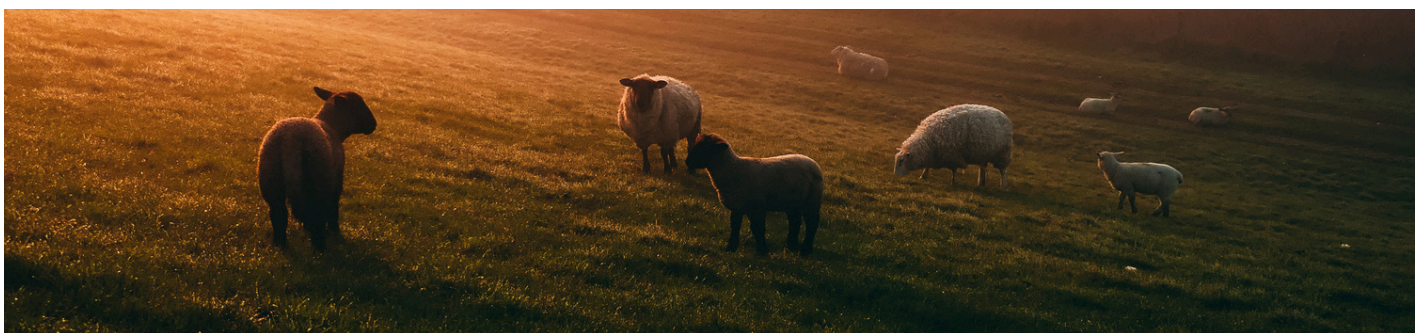
Thus Mark builds another vivid contrast in his story. On the one hand there is the press of the crowds – physical proximity and emotional expectation. On the other hand there is the invitation to rest and the quietness of a desert place. Mark paints a powerful picture of a godly rhythm so vital to our personal wellbeing, to healthy discipleship and the exercise of our ministry. Generous discipleship and the stewardship ministry of the local church require that same godly rhythm. Generosity is not born from reactive anxiety to financial need. Without prayer, reflection and leadership a stewardship ministry risks lacking a vision of God's abundance, being overwhelmed by need or fearful of scarcity.



SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD (6:33-34)

The phrase sheep without a shepherd (omitted by Luke and Matthew) is another echo of the Exodus story from Numbers 27:17. Moses, soon to depart, asks God to appoint a shepherd in his place, so the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd. The shepherd imagery is also strong in Ezekiel 34:5, Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?

Jesus has compassion on the crowd and begins to teach. It is interesting to note that the Greek verb for compassion (*esplanchnisthē*) is linked elsewhere in the Gospels to the healing miracles of Jesus (Mt 20:34; Mk 1:41) and the compassion that forgives financial debt (Mt 18:27). The compassion of our God and the breadth of our discipleship response touches all that is necessary to human living and flourishing, including the realities of our financial lives.



WHEN IT GREW LATE (6:35-37)

As God called Moses to lead his people in wilderness and fed them with the gift of manna, so Jesus teaches and provides abundantly for those who follow him in the scarcity of the wilderness. Just as for Israel, for Jesus' disciples the scarcity of the desert is a place of both trust and testing. It is late. They propose dismissing the crowd so they can find food (v36), a suggestion as compassionate as it is pragmatic. Instead, Jesus commands them to provide for the crowd themselves.

This is the heart of the story and the most vivid contrast. On the one hand there is the need of the crowd and the scarcity of local resources, a contrast being made between the desert place and the surrounding villages. The wording of the story is interesting. The solution of the disciples is to send the crowd to buy food for themselves (v36). Verse 37a is, by contrast, a simple command of Jesus: 'you give them something to eat'. In the mouths of the disciples the verb to buy is repeated again in v37b, this time with the incredulous query, are we to buy 200 coins worth of bread so that we can give them something to eat?

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark's account is characteristically blunt, reflecting perhaps the frustration, the incredulity, perhaps even the irritation of the disciples at being asked to do the impossible: it would cost six months wages to feed this lot! In his commentary Joel Marcus observes that this part of the story 'ends on a note of spiritual deficiency that corresponds to, but is even more distressing than, the material deficiency that has occasioned it' (p418). The disciples instinctively and understandably calculate the monetary cost at 200 coins and see no way it could address the need.

The dilemma of the disciples echoes to this day. Ministry needs and opportunities can sometimes overwhelm the resources of the local church. Our response is all too often constrained by thinking only in terms of balancing a budget. The modern day equivalent of, you give them something to eat, can provoke incredulity, frustration, irritation and opposition. The spiritual deficit we share with the disciples is a certain mystification as to how the spiritual life could possibly address this material need. When it comes to money we tend to think as pragmatic atheists.





BLESSED AND BROKEN (6:38-41)

Jesus' response is illuminating. Rather than reacting angrily to disbelief he asks two things of his disciples. First, he asks what food they do have; the five loaves and two fish. Second, he asks them to arrange the people in groups so they are ready to eat. Joel Marcus finds in Mark's use of words an increasing orderliness. What begins as a crowd in 6:34 (*ochlos*) becomes eating groups (*symposia*) and then clusters (*prasia*) of 100 and 50 which, he suggests, may reflect Israel's military camp arrangements in Exodus 18:21, 25 and be further echoes of Exodus typology in the story.

Jesus takes, blesses, breaks the bread (6:41), wording surely framed by early Eucharistic practice, as above. The bread is multiplied and Jesus gives (that verb again; see v37) to the disciples. They in turn then set the bread before (*paratithōsin*) the people. The bread which abundantly meets the physical need of the crowd is first blessed and broken by Jesus. The disciples set before the people what they have first received from Jesus.

Images of stewardship don't come any more beautiful or meaningful than this. All that God entrusts to us as stewards comes into our hands both blessed and broken and we give of what we receive. Generous giving is the litmus test of mature stewardship. What we give we have first received from God. And what we have received as both blessed and broken we are commanded to share.

Stewardship is rooted in both creation and Christology. God the creator is the owner and giver of all things (Ps 24:1; Haggai 2:8) and the goodness of the material world is given for our enjoyment, contentment, gratitude and generosity (1 Tim 6:7-10, 17-19). Equally, all that God entrusts to us is caught up in our obedience to Christ who calls us to let go of our pride of ownership of all we have and to follow him. Mammon makes a competing claim for Lordship in our lives (Mt 6:24). The cares of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word of God within us. The life of discipleship involves wrestling with the gravitational pull of wealth (Luke 12:13-21; 18:18-30; 19:1-10). Paul roots his appeal to generosity in the incarnation of Christ who became poor that we might become rich (2 Cor 8:9).



ALL ATE AND WERE FILLED (6:42-44)

The phrase, all ate and were filled is a further echo of the Exodus tradition, a reference to Deuteronomy 8:10, 'you shall eat and be full'. The Greek verb has the nuance of being completely satisfied and in Mt 5:6 is used in the Beatitudes in the promise of no longer hungering and thirsting for righteousness. The baskets in which surplus is collected are called *kophinos*. They were small wicker baskets and at a later date it seems they were part of traditional attire of the Jews. The twelve baskets very likely references the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel.



Finally, there is no obvious indication in the narrative that people knew a miracle had taken place. Perhaps this is a final contrast to note. Something visible happens in that people are fed. But how the miracle happens remains invisible, unseen. And that is how it is with our giving. What our giving achieves is visible in the sacred space of our church buildings and in the ministry and mission of our churches. What remains invisible and unseen is the grace that transforms the heart of the giver, the inner blessing and breaking of all that is entrusted to us, the willingness to trust in God's provision.