

I pray ...

Other than Jesus' resurrection, the feeding of the 5000 is the *only* miracle to be recorded in all four gospels – in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. There's so much happening in today's passage that it could fill an entire sermon series for a term. But, today, I'd like to focus on just one verse, or even *half* of one verse – the second half of verse 15: '*Jesus withdrew again to a mountain by himself.*' Each gospel writer records the story a little differently. Matthew and Mark spell out to the reader that Jesus went up to the mountainside to pray, just in case we were wondering what he might have been doing, and Luke's account doesn't include the storm on the lake afterwards.

What's clear in each account though, is that Jesus had just experienced one of the most stressful days of his ministry. The day began with the news of the death of John the Baptist in prison. Jesus tried to get away with his disciples, to find a quiet place, yet a crowd of thousands followed him. Why? Because news of miraculous healings had spread across the whole region. Though grief-stricken, he spent the day teaching and healing people. When it was discovered that the crowd had come without food, Jesus multiplied bread out of 5 small loaves and fed the entire

multitude. In the span of a few hours, he battled sorrow, stress, demands and needs. He deserved a good night's sleep. I'd have been desperate to close my eyes. Yet, when evening finally came, he told the crowd to leave and the disciples to board their boat, and he withdrew to the mountain by himself to pray. Not just for 10 minutes, though no-one would have questioned him if this had been the case. Not half-an-hour. Not a few hours. But, *all night*.

Apparently it was the right choice. A storm exploded over the Sea of Galilee leaving the disciples struggling to row and reach land. About 3 in the morning, Jesus came towards them, walking on the water. Hours earlier, he'd climbed the mountain utterly exhausted and, coming down, he reappears invigorated. And launches into action to save the day.

It isn't long after this event in Luke's gospel that the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray. And, remembering that night on the water, I wonder if the disciples' request was actually, '*Lord, teach us to pray like that!*' Teach us to find *strength* in prayer. To banish *fear* in prayer. To defy *storms* in prayer. To *feel* God's presence right beside us, just as you do. To come off a mountain after prayer with such *energy* and *power* to do God's will. To come off a mountain *knowing* God's will.

And the prayer he gives them is one of the simplest ever written. *'Our Father in heaven'*, it starts, *'hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.'*

Your will be done. Jesus tells us to pray that God's will be done on earth as in heaven. But most of the time, we struggle to even begin to work out what God's will might be – for us as individuals, our families and our church.

During our vision day last Sunday, we created a church profile using Robert Warren's work on the marks of a healthy church. Warren says that healthy churches, which typically are then churches that grow, are those that are energised by faith, have an outward looking focus, seek to find out what God wants, face the cost of change and growth, operate as a community, make room for all, and do a few things and do them well.

It was great to see a good cross-section of church members at the event – those who have worshipped here for decades, those who have been here just a few weeks, and lots in-between. Together, we scored ourselves highly on operating well as a community, and doing a few things and doing them well. And we scored the lowest on seeking to find out what God wants and having an outward-looking focus.

Our lowest score was seeking to know God's will. But how exactly do we find out what God wants? Where do we begin? Well, here's what Jesus says. In Matthew 11:29 he says *'Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.'* The translation is better I think in the Message Bible: *'Walk with me, work with me – watch how I do it.'* Young Chris said during the children's vision activity last week that he'd like to use his gift for rapping to help us worship. What a wonderful rap these words would make – *'Walk with me, work with me – watch how I do it.'*

Jesus was absolutely clear that he came *only* to do the will of his father.

John 6:38: *'For I've come down from heaven, not to do my will, but to do the will of him who sent me.'*

John 5:19: *'The Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees his Father doing.'*

John 12:49: *'For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say, and how to say it.'*

And at the very end, knowing that he was destined to die a cruel death, he prays these words recorded in Luke 22:42:

'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.'

How *do* we seek the will of God for our own lives and for the life of our church? We follow Jesus' example. *'Walk with me, work with me – watch how I do it.'* How did he do it? Time and time again we'd told how he withdrew to a quiet place to be with his Father and to pray. That doesn't mean that we have to be necessarily quiet in prayer. Prayer can be shouted or sung, or spoken or whispered, or laughed or cried – or it can be silent. But you need to give it time, just as Jesus did. Take time to relax, to rest, and to trust that God is present and is hearing you. Rest patiently for his voice to speak life and truth into every feeling and situation.

Last week I read in a new book by Hannah Fytche who is coming to preach to us in September, that prayer is sometimes about 'waiting for an hour until you suddenly see sunlight flash off a kingfisher's wing for a second. Prayer is sometimes the long wait for a sudden flash of realisation.' And the answers don't necessarily come whilst you're praying.

There had been much prayer surrounding the vision day on Sunday, but there was a moment during the feeding back when Graham said something like, *'Unless we're*

energised in our faith, then we won't achieve any of the other marks of a healthy church.' Unless our worship moves people to experience God's love, unless our energy comes from a desire to serve God and one another, unless we're engaging with scripture in ways that connect with life, and unless we help people to grow in, and then share, their faith, we won't be in a strong position to reach out with the good news and effectively serve our community. And even though in my presentation I'd said something similar – that this mark – being energised in our faith - stands at the head of the list, from which all the other marks flow - it wasn't until I heard *someone else* vocalise it that the lightbulb came on for me. Surely our focus, our priority has to be returning to the heart of what the Christian faith is all about – our pursuit of the love and knowledge of God and its outworking in our lives. *Knowing* God and being known by him. *Loving* God and knowing ourselves loved by him. And seeing the impact of this in our daily lives.

An answer to prayer. A flash of realisation. And there were others. A few weeks ago someone handed me a small piece of a paper with something they felt God was saying to us as a church. It was in the form of a prayer and it says this:

'Father God, please help us to be sensitive to one another. Help us to be careful that we don't look out too soon and far without being united. With our eyes fixed on you first.'

That was written on the 19th of May during our 24 hours of prayer as part of Thy Kingdom Come. I didn't understand its relevance then, how it fitted with what else God might be saying to us, but I do now.

And immediately after the vision day, one of you said to me, *'I pray, but I never hear anything back. How can I possibly know God's will if I never hear him speaking to me?'* What he didn't realise was that those words were words of God speaking to me. Words that affirmed what I was reading, what I was thinking and what I was hearing from others.

In the 24 hours following the vision event, as I reflected on the day and prayed, the words *'rooted and established in love'* kept repeating over and over in my mind. They aren't words of course that are unfamiliar to me or to you, and Hannah's book that I'd just finished is called *'Rooted in God's Grace'*, not that dissimilar.

But it was when I turned to the lectionary readings for this Sunday and read Ephesians 3: 14 to 21 that everything fell into place and I realised what God might well be saying to

us as a church going forward, and what our task for the coming year might be. Please continue to complete your action sheets and let me know what you think because they will contribute to the plan, but this is what I believe God is saying to us as a church.

To fix our eyes on him. To be united. And to know God *deep* within the very core of our beings and know his love for us. Summed up in these words from St Paul to his letter to the church in Ephesus, a church like us that was working out what it wanted to be and how to seek God's will. Words that I'll end with. Listen carefully:

'And I pray, that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure with the fullness of God.'

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever. Amen!"
Amen indeed!