

West Hereford Benefice Sermon 2nd August A Tale of Two Picnics. *Matthew 14.13–21*

Today's talk is about the story of the Feeding of the 5000. I've called it *A Tale of Two Picnics*. There's the big picnic for the 5000 – more in fact because in those days they probably only counted the men, shame on them. That must have been quite something! I've asked the Zoom congregation to bring along their teddy bears and other friends to join in the fun.

But there is another picnic in the story too: a picnic which was no picnic at all. Jesus has just heard that his cousin John the Baptist has been killed by Herod. That had come hard on the heels of his rejection at his home town of Nazareth, where they had so little faith in him that he could do very little for them.

So he decided to take time out, to recharge, and to listen to God for his word for what was going to come next. He goes off into the wilderness. It was no picnic. He probably didn't take any food and intended instead to fast and pray – as he had done not so long ago before his ministry began. And like then, though we can be sure he was trusting that God would strengthen and feed him with his word, as Isaiah promises in today's Old Testament reading: "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat;" he no doubt also expected a wrestling match with both God and the Satan, as he had done before (and another of today's readings is the story of how Jacob's wrestled with God).

Now it will be no surprise if I point out we too are living through a time of profound change, as a society and as a church. We have had some very unwelcome news. We need time to take it in, to process it; we need space to think it through; we need sustenance because all this is very exhausting; we need to hear the word of God, because the best way forward is not at all clear.

To go back to picnics for a moment, do you remember Tufty from the Tufty Club, which was a Road Safety initiative that many of us oldies will have been part of at school. As time went on it was joined by the Green Cross Code: can you remember it? In its simplest form it was just this: **Stop! Look! Listen!** Then when it was safe, you could cross the road.



That simple phrase **Stop! Look! Listen!** has been used in many places before and after that. It's there on our railways. UK Youth use it as the slogan for National Safeguarding Week.

And it can serve us well as a reminder of how Jesus got ready for a new start, and we can too.

Stop! comes first, because that's what we need to do first. When times are tough we are often very committed to action, and keeping calm and carrying on famously has a lot of merit to it. But as we have probably experienced for ourselves, the energy to carry on starts to run out after a while, and the batteries need recharging. And more than that: if we just carry on doing what we've done before, there's real danger that we'll sleepwalk into danger, and end up trying to cross the road with our

eyes shut; which is not safe in human terms and may not lead to salvation in spiritual ones. Stopping isn't easy, but that's the first thing we need to do – to decide to try and stop.

Next comes **Look!** When I was at infant school, the PE teacher would tell us to “find a space”. Once we've decided to stop, the next thing is to look for somewhere where we can find some space to recuperate and be with God. The classic way is to do as Jesus did, to book some time away. I used to go a nearby religious house where they knew me and would leave me be, first to recover and then do business with God. Not everyone can get away like that of course, but with some imagination perhaps everyone *can* find a way of at least breaking their routine, and creating a bit of space. John Wesley's mother Susanna trained her 19 children – yes 19 – to know that when she pulled her skirts over her head it was time to be quiet and leave her alone, because beneath them she was in her prayer space, just her and God.

And then it's time to **Listen!** Just having a break is good for us. But we can hope to do better than that: not just to have a human re-charge, but to connect with power from on high that is the Spirit of God, and so find not just resuscitation but resurrection, the possibility of a real new start going the way God wants. So listening for God and to God is what comes next. Audible words and signs in the sky may be rare, but my experience is that in one way or another God is both good and faithful and will get his message across to us at the times when it really matters.

At three points in my episcopal ministry some very simple words came to me in a way that made me sure they were from God: Speak from the heart to the heart about the heart of the matter; the image of the church as the Vine with roots, shoots and fruits; and the command to Feed my Sheep. His words for you will probably be different, but if they feel good and godly, good for God's people, and 'good to go' giving you energy and purpose, then I'd suggest they are well worth sharing with someone you trust and giving them time to take root: you may just have received your marching order for the next stage in the journey of life.

Picture credit: Network Rail