

It's hard to imagine that we start our advent series next week! We're going to look at the description of the Messiah given by Isaiah and in particular the four phrases: Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace. We're going to see how each of these relates to Jesus and how they help us to understand more about him.

Today we're going to spend a few minutes thinking about how and what we think of Jesus. The miracle of the feeding of 5000 is the only one that is in all four Gospels. That alone should make us think that there is something about it that we need to grapple with.

The disciples didn't really understand it, despite the fact that they experienced it. Later in the chapter we have the story of Jesus walking on the water and, after Jesus gets into the boat and everything calms down Mark tells us that they were amazed – because they had not understood about the loaves: if they had understood about the loaves they would not have been surprised at what happened next. Mark goes on to tell us that their hearts were hardened.

I tend to think of someone who is hard hearted as someone who is a bit self-centred, mean spirited, prone to angry outbursts and doesn't treat people well. I don't know what you would picture. I'm going to tell you something you need to know: a sweet little grandmother can have a hard heart. A preacher in the pulpit can have a hard heart. People can have a hard heart without those closest to them even realizing it. But God knows about it, and if you have a hard heart, He wants you to recognize it and repent of it.

How does that happen? I think that for most of us it is a slow process. When we first come to faith there is an excitement about God and the things of God. Over time that excitement dies as other things crowd in and we get a bit lazy about reading the bible and praying. If you have just heard me say that and thought, "Here we go again", then I would urge you to ask yourself why that is your response. Our hearts become hardened when we don't read and try to apply God's word. It is as simple and as obvious as that.

God has given us his written word to help us to live our lives in the way we should. 2 Tim 3: *16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

Our hearts become hard when we know that God has said one thing and we deliberately do another. As we listen to God and do what he says our hearts become attuned to his voice – they soften. Hebrews 4:12 says, "*For the word of God is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword...*" The

significance of a sword having two edges is that it is able to cut both ways. The application of that in regard to the subject of a hardened heart, is that the word of God always affects us one way or another. It's either drawing you in and softening you up, or it is cauterizing you and hardening you against its truth. We are warned throughout the bible that we must be people who don't hear the word and ignore it, but we must hear it and do what it says.

So, I would ask you to consider the state of your heart this morning – are you attuned to God, or has your heart become a bit calloused?

Let's look and see what they should have understood as they saw this miracle unfold on the side of the hill.

The disciples had just returned from their first missionary journey. Jesus had sent them out to tell people that the Kingdom of God was close and to heal the sick. They had come back with amazing stories but they were exhausted. They needed a rest and so Jesus decided to take them to a quiet place. His intention was to escape for short time but it didn't work.

The crowd followed them. John tells us that many came because of the miracles Jesus had done. It wasn't that they were that interested in following and obeying the teachings of Jesus. A number followed because of what they could get. They "oohed" and "aahed" at his miracles, but their hearts remained unchanged.

Jesus was moved with compassion – that's the heart of the gospel: the compassion of God for human beings.

John's version of the story tells us that Jesus asked the disciples to feed the people despite the fact that he already knew what he was going to do. They complained that there wasn't enough food; that they had no money; that it was too late; there were too many people.

Here's the first lesson they were supposed to learn: **Never assess a problem in the light of your own resources**

The disciples did what, if we're honest, we do. We look at what we don't have. We plan and calculate, ponder and deliberate, we agonize about things until, in desperation, we let God in on it. Sometimes we plough on wishing for a particular outcome and calling it faith. But faith is not a synonym for wishing! Faith and wishing are not even related even though some people think they are. To them, if you wish real hard, sweat a little as you do, then in response "Tinker Bell" will come and sprinkle a little magic dust and everything will work out just

the way you want it. That simply is not faith. Faith is a response to the Word of God. Jesus wanted a faith response from the disciples. "Lord this problem is too big for us, but not for you.

Let me add this also. It is not enough to say, "Well, I'm doing the best I can." The truth is, you are not doing the best you can until you bring God in on it. The disciples are the classic example in the New Testament of people facing a difficult problem and looking at it discouragingly, but not bringing God in on it. King Saul and Israel in I Samuel 17 is an Old Testament picture of the same type of failure. They had a problem with Goliath and the Philistines that seemed to be insurmountable. They left God out of the picture. Young David, as he surveyed the same situation, brought God into the picture and went out to claim the victory.

So lesson #1 was Jesus teaching the disciples that when you face a problem do not face it in your own strength and resources. Include God in that situation and it will change the circumstances.

The second lesson is this: ***a little is a lot if God is in it***

When the boy gave his food to Jesus two things happened: First--what he has is transferred to Jesus. Second-- what he has is transformed by Jesus. This is a good example of the principle of dedication that is given to us in the bible. It may be small in quantity. It may even be small in quality. But if you transfer it to Jesus, it will be transformed by him.

I want to ask you; Have you done this yet? Have you said to Jesus, "Lord, all I have and all that I will have I give it to you."

We can have little and it will remain little as long as we keep it. But if we have little and give it to God--God multiplies it. Remember the widow of Zerephath in I Kings 17? Elijah asked her for some food and all she had left was enough for her last meal with her son but she surrendered what she had to God through Elijah and God multiplied it.

Never assess a problem in the light of your own resources,
a little is a lot if God is in it,

Third lesson: ***during the storm is a great time to exercise faith***

We're told that as night fell Jesus saw the disciples struggling and just before dawn he went out to them, but he was about to pass them by. Sometimes we think that God should rush to our side and remove all our problems instantly but Jesus didn't do that. He was expecting them to think about what they had seen and to realise that they needed to trust him. It's not in the story in Mark, probably because Peter dictated it, but Matthew tells us that one disciple did

eventually exercise faith. Peter saw Jesus and at Jesus' command got out of the boat and walked toward him. That's what we're supposed to do. We're supposed to trust God, realising that Jesus can transform the storm, that we can face anything as long as we invite him to come with us. There's another story where they're out in a storm but this time Jesus is asleep in the boat. He is resting and they are struggling. They are so fearful that they wake him up not realising that they were never really in danger because he was with them.

The contrast being drawn here is highlighted in the difference between Jesus' reaction and theirs. Jesus saw the crowd and had compassion – they saw the crowd and saw problems.

It's easy to be critical of the disciples but they had no other experience to draw on. Sure they knew the OT stories of how God had dealt with his people but this was all a bit new to them. They were just beginning to realise who Jesus was and they didn't really get it until Pentecost. We don't have that excuse. We have 2,000 years of testimony to draw on. We see what God has done for and through his people and yet we are still slow to believe and quick to worry. In his compassion for the people Jesus was able to provide more than enough for everyone and surely that's the most important lesson of all.