

+WEEKLY REFLECTION

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Context is everything when reading the Bible

Matthew 12 v1-21

The late writer Douglas Adams told of a time at a railway station when he had a few minutes to spare, so he bought a coffee and a packet of biscuits.

He sat at his table with a man opposite him and opened his newspaper. Then the man lent across, opened the packet of biscuits lying on the table between them and took one.

Adams didn't quite know what to do. So, being English, he said nothing, and took a biscuit himself. A moment later the man took another, and Adams took another. And on it went, the two of them working through the packet in silence.

Adams grew more and more indignant with every round at the sheer nerve of this biscuit-thief sitting across from him. Until the last biscuit was gone and the man stood up and left.

Adams sat there, fuming, until he got up, folded his paper — and there, underneath it, was his own packet of biscuits. Unopened. He had been eating the other man's biscuits the whole time.

Sometimes reading the Bible is a little bit like that. Without the context of the story, we are likely to miss the point, and there is a risk that we misread the passage.

"Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew." We should read that and ask, heard what? In the previous 12 verses, John the Baptist has been beheaded by Herod. John was Jesus' cousin, and son of Elizabeth his mum's close friend. That is why Jesus gets into a boat and makes for a deserted place. He is grieving, and he wants to be alone.

But the crowd will not give him space. They follow on foot around the shore, carrying their sick, drawn to him by their need and by the hope that he offers.

"When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them."

Here is a miracle we might miss: compassion in the midst of grief. Jesus sets aside his own need and cares for the crowd, healing the sick and feeding thousands from five loaves and two fish. The feeding of the 5000 is the outworking of an astounding act of generosity and grace.

So, I pray that we would each be inspired by Jesus' example this week: whether we are unknowingly sharing biscuits with a stranger or going above and beyond by caring for others when we ourselves are hurting.

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