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## Becoming Companions

Mark 8: 1-9a

A sermon preached at St Martin-in-the-Fields on zoom on May 17, 2020 by Revd Dr Sam Wells

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I want to reflect with you on the word ‘companion,’ and its significance in the life you’re beginning and renewing together as members of the Nazareth Companions.

It’s conventional to think of the most central question in our human imagination as ‘Why do we die?’ – or more specifically, what happens to us when we do. But I think there’s an even more fundamental question than that. You may be aware of the philosophical idea known as solipsism. Solipsism doubts the existence of anything outside one’s own mind. More broadly, it means the assumption that I am the only reality, and any connection I make to other beings is only conventional, and not real.

Christianity is a fundamental contradiction of solipsism. It maintains that the heart of all things is God reaching out to be in relationship with us in Christ; and this every time we reach out to make and maintain true relationship, we’re imitating the profound solidarity that’s the first principle of the universe. Just pause for a moment and see how that transforms what might otherwise seem such an important question, what happens when we die: when we die, we’re released into perfect relationship – with God, one another and the creation – and we discover the profound solidarity for which all things were created.

So for you who are becoming companions, you are literally living God’s future now, by taking a significant step in declaring that relationship is the heart of your existence. Your life is to be lived in solidarity with God and one another. The seven Nazareth commitments are an attempt today to imitate the life of forever. A casual glance at the term companions might suppose it was about being companions of God. It is; but it’s just as much about being companions of one another.

What could possibly go wrong with a community like the Nazareth Companions? I want to engage for a moment with the two most prevalent ways in which communities like this can struggle. I want to draw attention to a neglected passage in Mark’s gospel – the feeding of the 4000. The first way is about feeling inadequate, and believing the other companions are much holier, more disciplined and more accomplished than you. Here I point you to Mark chapter 8. Just a couple of chapters before, Jesus has fed 5000 people. Here some very similar things happen. Again there’s a large crowd, again there are loaves and fishes. But the

amazing thing is, again the disciples have no idea what to do, and no confidence that Jesus is going to be enough for them. Even though they just witnessed Jesus feed the 5000 shortly before. We retain this fantasy that, if we were one of the twelve, all our doubts and faults and weaknesses would disappear, and we'd be on a perpetual high of faith and delirium. This story shows otherwise. Jesus' first companions were the fragile, the faltering, the forgetful. If that's you, you're prime material to be a companion.

It's easy to think, if we have the feeding of the 5000, why do we need the feeding of the 4000? Just to show how stupid the disciples are? No. It's here to tell us about the other perennial temptation of a community. The 5000 feeding is in Jewish territory; the 4000 feeding is in Gentile territory. Throughout the New Testament runs a debate we know all too well: who is the gospel for? The disciples are always tempted to think it's just for themselves. Their foolishness in this story can be explained if you realise it never occurred to them God's grace was to be poured out on the Gentiles. A community like Nazareth is always in danger of trying to circumscribe God's grace. It took the pandemic to make the Nazareth Community realise it couldn't be limited to those within easy reach of St Martin-in-the-Fields. The companions are like the Gentiles, those once out of reach, now integral to the vision. There can be no outsiders when it comes to grace. We're all among the 4000.

So this is what it means to be a Nazareth Companion: you're facing the two abiding challenges of community – to think it's easier for others, and to try to restrict the wideness of God's mercy. But your calling is the greatest one of all: to imitate the God who in Christ becomes our companion, by being companions of God, one another and the new creation – and showing that solidarity, not solitude, is the heart of it all.