

What are they among so many

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[0 : 00] Now let's turn to that passage that we read in John's Gospel, John chapter 6, and especially words that we find in verse 9.

The words of Andrew, there is a lad here which hath five barley loaves and two small fishes, but what are they among so many?

These last words, but what are they among so many? Statistics can be very depressing.

A Scottish church census was taken in 1984 and then again ten years later in 1994. And the results were not very encouraging.

The number of adults attending church in Scotland in all denominations went down from 660,000 to 575,000 in 1994.

[1 : 07] A drop of 13% in ten years. Now in our own church and other Presbyterian churches, the smaller Presbyterian churches who were grouped together, there was also a drop, a greater drop, of 22% over those ten years.

Now one of the most worrying things of all about those statistics concerns the loss of young people from the churches. There was a decline of 34% among those who were children, the under-tens, in 1984, and those who were in their teens in 1994.

In other words, over those ten years when they aged, from children to teenagers, there was a decline of 34%. And an even more massive decline from the teens to the twenties.

A massive decline of 48%, almost half. Now at the beginning of this century, by contrast, a new church was being built every week in Scotland.

And as we approach the end of the century, the church is losing the equivalent of one congregation of 225 people every week.

[2 : 35] Now these statistics are staggering and frightening. In fact, it has been projected that if that rate of decline continues, there will be no one in church by the year 2044.

Now that may sound a long way away to those of us who were born in the first half of this century. But for the younger people, that means that that would be within their lifetime.

Now, statistics don't always work that way. And thank God they don't. But it's frightening to look at that rate of decline and to see what it would be if it was projected over a long time.

Now all these statistics can fuel our sense of defeat. We can all identify with Philip and Andrew here. In their dismay when they asked, what are they among so many?

They looked at the statistics of the situation. They looked at the statistics of the crowds of people, the hugeness of the task facing them, and the smallness of their resources.

[3 : 52] And they said, what are they among so many? Well, I want to look with you at what these words suggest to us about two things.

Or, putting it round another way, we can look at these words in two ways. The statistics of despair, and the statistics of challenge.

And you can look at every situation in that way. Here, as a congregation, you could look at the challenge that confronts you.

You could look at the statistics in terms of challenge. And you could say, well, we're small. And there's a great work out there. So it's a great challenge. There are tremendous needs and problems, tremendous scope in this community of league.

So it's a great challenge. Or you could look on it as the statistics of despair. And you could say, as Andrew implies here, what can we do?

[4 : 54] The resources are so small. We're so small. Our ability is so small. And the task is so enormous and endless. So you see, we can look at the same situation in these two ways.

So first, let's look at the statistics of despair. The disciples looked at the greatness of the need.

Now, they had all the statistics. In verse 7, Philip had it all worked out. He seemed to be a bit of a mathematician. He said, 200 penny worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may take a little.

And in verse 10, we're told the number of men. And the other Gospels remind us that there were women and children beside that. 5,000. So, it wasn't that they were unaware of what the challenge was or unaware of the statistics.

They knew them. And Philip had made some analysis of it. There was the sheer scale of the problem. The numbers of people involved.

[6 : 09] And also, in Matthew's Gospel, the point is brought out. The urgency of the problem. Night was falling. And the disciples were keen that Jesus would send the people away so that they could get something to eat in the villages round about.

So, not only was there the sheer scale of the problem, there was the urgency of the situation. Now, we know something of that today. We know the scale of the problem.

We know from our newspapers, our news, everything we read and come across in our modern society, the tremendous problems that confront us today in our society.

And we know the greatness of the numbers involved. We've been mentioning the figures concerning the decline of church attendance. And that means as church attendance declines, as any contact, any meaningful contact with any church declines, there are more and more people out there, more children, more young people, who have no idea whatsoever what the gospel of Jesus Christ is.

They are getting further and further away from the roots that this nation once had in the gospel of Jesus Christ. The task is enormous.

[7 : 35] And the task is also urgent. The urgency is brought home by what the Bible, the Word of God tells us.

Here, the disciples were only talking about feeding people with physical bread. But Jesus in this whole chapter is so concerned to grapple with the spiritual needs of people.

And of course, that is the greatest urgency of all. The people around us are dying. People around us are in total confusion.

People around us are lost and perishing without Christ. And in doing so, it would appear in greater numbers. And so the task is urgent.

We have all the statistics concerning the problems of our society. The statistics of the disintegration of society, the breakup of families, one in three, heading towards one in two marriages, breakup.

[8 : 45] We have the statistics of a society where there is rising homelessness, where there is drug problems, where there is abuse, where there is suicide.

So many problems. And all of these have statistics illustrating how great the problem is. And behind those statistics, there are real people who are hurting and suffering.

And we know that there is a tremendous need for the Christian church to be addressing these problems.

For the Christian church to be reaching out. For the Christian church not just to be satisfying with holding on to what we've got. Even to hold on to what we've got would be an achievement.

But we must never lose sight of the great vision that God gives us in his word. The great commission that Jesus gives us. That we're constantly to be reaching out.

[9 : 50] We're to be going into the world. Because it's out there that people are perishing. It's out there that people are going further and further and further away from Jesus Christ.

the greatness of the need. The disciples were aware of these statistics. We too surely are aware of these statistics of need.

But there was another aspect to the statistics. The smallness of the resources. Andrew looked at the situation and he said what are they among so many?

He looked at the many. But he also looked at the smallness of the resources. The few loaves and fish that were there as the resources to feed all these people.

And he said it's ridiculous. It is impossible. That's all we have. We've inquired around and this is all the food there is. This little boy who's got this food.

[10 : 57] Whatever it was. Whether it was his own to feed himself or he was taking it somewhere for someone we don't know. But that's all that there was. Again they had the statistics of the smallness of the resources and it seemed totally inadequate.

Now in the same way we have the statistics of the smallness of our resources. we know from the kind of figures I was quoting at the beginning the smallness of the church's resources even in terms of manpower.

The figure for church attendance and remember this is church attendance of any kind is down to 14% of the adult population down from 17% in 1984.

and we know that in our own denomination again there are statistics of decline. We know that there are financial shortfalls. We know that there is a freeze on new projects.

We know that there is a decline in numbers. Now sometimes it appears that there are encouraging things like for a time the number of members in the free church seem to be growing.

[12 : 13] But there has been almost a cataclysmic collapse of what we call the adherent base of the church. Those who had counted themselves free church.

And so often in the past they were those who in the grace of God might be expected to become members of the church. So all these statistics again underline the smallness of the resources that we have to meet the phenomenal need around us.

It's not just that the church is small it's that the church is dwindling. The resources are not just small they seem to be getting smaller. Now we can look at that on the grand scale of our own denomination or of all the churches in Scotland we can look at it too in our own situation.

You can look at it here in your own congregation and you can perhaps sometimes feel we're very small you can perhaps even feel well we've dwindled. Those of you who are older can look back and you can think of times when the church was full.

Things are different. There has been decline there has been a dwindling and it's very easy in those circumstances to look at the statistics and to have a council of despair.

[13 : 36] That's what Andrew was saying here. What are they among so many? It's impossible. That's the way we feel. As we look at our own situation our own church's situation we think the resources are too small for the great need.

Sometimes we can look at that personally as well and we can say my own personal resources are too small for this. I don't have the strength I don't have the wisdom I don't have the energy I don't have the spiritual zeal to meet this situation and so we say like the disciples there's no point in even contemplating this.

That's why they said as it's recorded in Matthew 14 send them away. Now it wasn't that the disciples were hard hearted it was that they looked at the situation and they said it's impossible we can't do this send them away so that they'll get something somewhere else.

Now so often we come to that point too for virtually in the church we're saying send them away we can't handle this we don't know how to face up to these statistics today we don't know how to face up to the people that are behind these statistics we don't know how to face up to this challenge it's too big let it go away now we may not say that in so many words but so often that's the implication of our actions and our thinking we're happy for things perhaps just to continue as they are and that is the counsel of despair there's even a temptation for us to leave ourselves at the very end of this chapter John chapter 6 that question faced the disciples in verses 66 and 67 from that time this whole chapter remember is a unit from that time many of his disciples went back and walked no more with him then said

Jesus unto the twelve will he also go away do you know if you study this chapter carefully you'll see that it is concerned with the statistics of decline it starts at the beginning of the chapter with thousands of people maybe there was as many as ten thousand people there because it was five thousand men thousands of people crowding to Jesus they were going to make him king everything seemed to be so triumphant and everybody was getting carried away but by the end of the chapter there are only the twelve left and Jesus challenges them Jesus puts it to them will you also go away because gradually in stages throughout this chapter people left Jesus words were too hard the situation was different from what they expected it to be and they either drifted away or they turned away in disgust now we're living at a time where it requires great commitment to be committed to the church of Jesus

[17 : 14] Christ the church in every area is dwindling the idea people have the church is so often a caricature of what the church is so often we're misunderstood misrepresented it's hard to be a member of a church to identify with it to say you're a Christian and a committed Christian there are so many problems so many temptations for us to say well I'll just be a Christian in my own little life and to give up on the great task the great challenge that confronts us so you see there are the statistics of despair we look at these statistics the greatness of the need the smallness of the resources and there's the temptation to give up I want to look with you secondly at the statistics of challenge and the interesting thing of course is that it's the same statistics that we're looking at it's just the attitude that's different and the first thing

I want to notice there is the need for realism Jesus never encourages wishful thinking or ignorance of the true situation for instance when he was sending out his disciples he said the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few Jesus wasn't asking the disciples here to look at this vast crowd of people and to pretend that it was just nothing for all this crowd to be fed Jesus wanted them to realize the greatness of the need he wanted the statistics to sink in and as he sent them out as preachers he wanted them to see that the harvest was plentiful there was a huge scope but they were so few and in the same way today we need to face up to the reality before we can even begin to respond to the challenge we must face what the real challenge is it's no use pretending that we're back in the past where the church had a status in the community or in the world that it doesn't have today or where the church had an influence in the world that it doesn't have today or where people tended to come to church for various reasons and could be evangelized just like that we've got to face up to the real situation that the people are not in the churches by and large and we've got to as individual

Christians be concerned about how we can get people to hear the gospel whether it is by directly inviting them to come to church or whether it is by speaking to them or witnessing to them ourselves or whatever we have got to face up to these real statistics we've got to take stop of the statistics as well and we've got to ask ourselves well where the church is in serious decline what are the factors and in other places where the church seems to be growing what are the factors is there something that we can learn yes we know that God is sovereign in all these things but God works through means and he's given us the means he has given us the gospel and he's given us instructions as to how that gospel is to be presented he's given us instructions as to how our churches are to operate as to how we are to operate as Christians what attitudes we are to have and we have to examine all these things and say well where the church seems to be flourishing what's happening why is it happening what is

God doing there notice what's God doing not what people are doing what God is doing through those people so we've got to analyze those statistics and look at the real situation but of course supremely there is the need for obedience to Jesus Christ it's in Matthew that this is recorded when the disciples said we've got these five barley loaves and two small fish what are they among so many what did Jesus say he said bring them here to me and you see that is the crux of everything that happened there Jesus said give me these small resources give me these little things that you've got give me these things that you despise that you think are too small too weak too powerless to do anything in this world bring them here to me and what he's commanding us through this is to commit the little that we have whatever it is the smallness of our resources our weak faith whatever it is committed to

Jesus it was Thomas Chalmers that was famous for his phrase the power of little the little thing he started off a scheme for collecting for the Bible society which was a new thing in those days of a penny a week now a penny doesn't sound very much it was probably a lot more then in those days than it is today at the beginning of last century but a penny a week seems so small and yet he could show he could calculate the tremendous benefits that would come if ordinary just poor people were able to afford a penny a week for such a work and that was just one example of the way in which he applied this kind of thinking and you see it's true when people realized yes they have small resources yes they have very little but if they commit that to

[23 : 44] Jesus Christ in faith then there can be a great reward there can be a great development from these little things here the disciples obeyed Jesus they gave him the little resources they had handed it over to him and of course the rest is history Jesus in his great grace and power fed the whole multitude with those small resources isn't it interesting you see Jesus could have I'm sure if he had wanted to he could have created food out of nothing he could have created food out of stone as he was tempted to do by the devil on one occasion he could do all these things I'm quite sure but Jesus took the small resources that were already there the little that they had the little that perhaps they despised and they thought was worthless and you see that's what happens by

God's grace when people are prepared to be obedient to him and to say yes there are huge huge challenges facing us and yes our resources are so small we don't know what we can do with them we don't know how to do it but we are prepared to be obedient we are prepared to offer it to you we are commanded to give our bodies as living sacrifices to God we're commanded to give ourselves however poor and useless we may be or we may think we are in his service but we're asked to do it and in faith trust him that he will use us now that's what happened here the disciples didn't have any faith in the situation but at least they had this amount of faith to give those resources to Jesus Christ we need to do that in our own individual lives we may face huge challenges you may face huge personal challenges

I know nothing about this word this this word comes to you to yield yourself and what you are to Jesus Christ and he will enable you in that situation and as a congregation give what resources you have to Jesus Christ in zeal for his kingdom and he will take those resources and he will use them but also we see here the need for organization I think that's something that we often pass over in this miracle of Jesus in Mark chapter 6 this is brought out particularly that the people were divided into groups there as they sat on the grass and of course Jesus took the food and he distributed to the disciples and then the disciples distributed to those who were sat down in groups so you see it wasn't just a kind of ad hoc thing it wasn't just a kind of chaotic situation

Jesus ordered it Jesus organized it and Jesus had it in such a way that everybody could be fed that's something that as I suggested we pass over but it's important in the Christian church and in the Christian life we should not despise organization and structures and all these things I know so often people complain about just forms and structures and organizations and committees and whatnot and of course all these things can be absolutely useless if they're just a kind of formalism an empty formalism but if we're going to be doing God's work if we're going to be giving our little resources to him then there must be organization we must be getting together and asking ourselves how can this be done there's a huge task confronting us there are all these people out there there are all these great needs out there and there are but of course supremely there is a need for compassion in

Matthew chapter 14 the passage that we read earlier and in verse 14 we're told the source of all this great miracle that took place that day it was that Jesus looked at the crowds and he had compassion on them he had compassion on them and he healed their sick he had compassion on them and he fed them that was the source of that great miracle that was the source for this turning of the statistics of despair into the statistics of challenge because Jesus had compassion the whole situation was transformed that's how the people got fed that's how the little resources were transformed and of course it is the same today the supreme compassion of Jesus Christ he still today commands his people he commands us he commands his church to face up to the challenges and to bring the bread of life to the people of our communities and our society that's what he calls us to because his heart is full of compassion towards those who are in need today yes there are people around us who are even hungry physically there are people on the streets who are begging but there are so many more people who are hungry spiritually including the people who are hungry physically and we're called to show his love to people in need we're called to be channels of his blessing just as the disciples were called here

[30 : 40] Jesus could have again I'm sure have gone round everyone with the bread and fish but he chose not to he chose to pass it to his disciples so that they could be channels of blessing to others and that's what he calls his disciples to still today he calls you to that ministry still today to be channels of his blessing you're hopeful that you're going to have a new minister soon but you can't expect that that minister however good and great he is under God is going to be able to be the one channel of blessing to people in leaf or even to yourselves he is called as one channel of blessing he's called as one instrument of God's grace but every member of the body of Christ here is called to be a channel of blessing to others in the fellowship and a channel of blessing to people outside taking the bread of life you may learn something here from the preaching of the word on Sunday now that may do your own soul good it may help to transform your own life and your own understanding but why not share it with somebody else why not take that bread that you've got that's fed you this is the marvellous thing about the bread of life it can be passed on to nourish somebody else's soul to feed somebody else's hunger and to give them life so we can look at the statistics and on the one hand they can lead us to despair or defeatism but on the other hand because we know the compassion of Jesus

Christ we know his grace and we know his greatness and his power they can be statistics of challenge so that today Jesus speaks to us and he says bring them here to me commit these resources to me and have the compassion that I have for those who are in need so the problem is not the statistics so often we blame statistics for things don't we but the problem is not in the statistics the problem is in our reaction to them we're called at the end of this communion season to express our thanks to God for what he has done to us what greater way could we express thanks than by showing this love that has been shown to us to other people sharing it with them also beggars who have found bread telling other beggars where they can find that bread that will satisfy so these statistics we've been thinking about are they going to be statistics of despair for us or statistics of challenge they can be statistics of challenge if we are prepared to see that challenge respond to it by God's grace and become instruments in his hands of providing help for those who are so desperately in need let us pray our gracious and loving heavenly father we thank you yet again for all the grace and kindness you've shown to us you have fed us you have fed us physically you have fed us spiritually you have clothed us physically you have clothed us spiritually here tonight we are aware of the great things you've done for us in Christ we have thought about his death we have meditated on what it means for us we have known what it is to have our sins forgiven and cleansed away and yet there are so many around us who starve and who are in rags so many around us who are far off from the kingdom of

Jesus Christ Lord we pray that you would encourage us and equip us and empower us and bless all that we seek to do in dedicating ourselves anew to Jesus Christ our Lord we pray that people may come to see Jesus they may focus upon him and learn to love him and to serve him Lord we pray that you would give wisdom to us as Christians and as a church to point to Jesus so many people in our society want to point to the things that are wrong want just to see controversy and we pray that you would enable us rather to show forth Jesus Christ to point to him as the answer and the solution to all that is wrong we pray that people may see that in our own lives too we ask this in

Jesus name and for his sake amen