

## Pentecost 7B

**Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 23; Mark 6:30-34; 54-56.**

### Blessed Rest

“Jesus said to the apostles, ‘come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while’. For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in a boat to a deserted place by themselves” (Mark 6:31-32). And later in our Gospel passage: “people at once recognised Jesus, and rushed around that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was”. (v. 54,55).

I felt a great weariness when I read these words –coming and going, rushing, missing meals. Oh dear, Jesus has had a peek at my life! And what an apt description for many who attend to those in need, in the Church and without. There, around Jesus, it seems they were all frenetic - the ones closest to Jesus, his inner group of disciples, running around ministering to people, and the great crowds, swelling and scrambling to get near to him. It’s intense activity on all fronts. And there’s Jesus in the middle of it, responding, working, yet with a grounded calm.

As we meet them today, the disciples were returning from their first solo ministry trips. They had been sent by Jesus, two by two, to the villages, to proclaim repentance and to heal the sick and cast our demons. And it seemed it had all gone well. Mark even uses the word “apostles” for the first time to describe them on their return. Almost like a graduation from an “L” plate to “P”’s –they went out as disciples- students, learners; and now they are “the sent ones” (“apostle” meaning sent one in the original Greek). In the culture of that time, which revolved around honour and patronage, to be recognised as “sent” or as emissaries was a great honour – one was firmly identified as a special intermediary, acting on behalf of one with greater status. So, on their return from field trip, we can pick up the buzz –they were all go, not even time to stop and eat, responding to all and sundry in an exhausting schedule! And likely more than a little swelled with their own importance.

What does a good leader do with his/her people after a particularly frantic time at work? He/she says “time to rest; time to debrief; get away from the action”. We have every reason to believe that Jesus, too, needed time out. In this part of the story, Jesus, too, had been out and about in the villages, teaching. News also, had filtered back to them about John the Baptist’s beheading. (And Mathew’s recounting of this same story makes it very clear that Jesus needed to withdraw when hearing of John’s beheading). Time needed to withdraw, grieve, recoup.. So –Jesus and his apostles together try to get away from it all.

But they can’t. The crowds follow them –as the disciples went by boat, the crowds went by foot. More hurrying. More coming and going. Jesus steps on shore, and doesn’t say, like I might have, “please see my disciples about an appointment for next week”. We’re told “he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things”. The disciples become invisible at this point – in the next verses, which our lectionary of appointed readings skips, the disciples arrive at Jesus’ side somewhat later – perhaps in the meantime they had been able to slip off for their rest. But not Jesus. Not yet.

In the chunk of verses missed in our reading today, Jesus then feeds the 5,000, goes off by himself to pray, and walks on water – and then, coming back to shore is swamped by more people in need –more rushing.

There's some great contrasts going on in our passage today. There's the frenetic movement and hurrying around. The disciples in their ministry. The rushing of the crowds, trying to grasp a lifeline from Jesus, from his disciples, perhaps from anyone who could help make their lives right: lives that were being lived without grounding, without care, without justice. Like sheep without a shepherd, as Jesus calls it. And then – in contrast - there's the call from Jesus to his disciples, to step aside and rest, to follow his own pattern of withdrawal for prayer; and for the crowds, there's Jesus the Shepherd; an image of pastoral compassion, that carries with it a centeredness and stability and stillness –just like we find in Psalm 23 –“he leads me besides still waters”.

Jesus aptly describes the people's desperate scrambling as being like “sheep without a shepherd”. What he would have been looking upon were downtrodden people, exploited and broken by the Roman occupation, vulnerable and without proper leadership. Not only was the political leadership oppressive, but there was a vacuum of religious and moral leadership. Jesus looks out upon these people of Galilee, and has compassion – and the original word used is strong – he has a gut wrenching pity, even anger towards the cause of their depressed conditions. And so Jesus begins to *teach* them. As the story moves on, he also feeds them, and we know that wherever he went he healed people as well. [Just an aside: can you see here the two essential thrusts of Christ's ministry, and the ministry of all Christians – word and action?]

So, let's attend to the contrasts: the desperate dashing of the crowds; the disciples rushing around, perhaps spurred on by a sense of their own self-importance, but with all the signs of compassion fatigue as they try to meet the needs of all; and Jesus with a centeredness, his very being speaking peace and calm. Just like a shepherd, whose presence with the flock instils security, order and safety; the kind of shepherd that the prophet Jeremiah speaks of – one who gathers his flock, dispelling fear and dismay, enabling fruitfulness; and the shepherd of Psalm 23, refreshing, guiding, forgiving, feeding.

Can you see our 21<sup>st</sup> century life here? All this frenetic activity, all this going to and fro, is more a hallmark of our life and times than for these people of the first century. The words “rat race” and “*weltschmerz*” (world weariness), are graphic and true words of description for how so many of us experience life. And it seems to be contagious as we almost look to outdo each other, as if our busy-ness was a marker of success and a symbol of pride. Busy-ness is the greatest malaise of this century – and it doesn't stop at retirement (does it!). In so many ways we are a tired and weary people, and at danger of being a tired and weary church.

Where might we each find ourselves in this passage today? Among the hassled disciples, trying to meet never-ending needs, feeling it all has to be up to us? Or in

the crowd frantically running after Jesus, in search of teaching, of healing, crying out for release from captivity? We don't have to be living under a political dictatorship to feel the need for release from that which enslaves us –addictions, oppressive expectations and the demands of life, the baggage from our pasts. Or are we with Jesus as he forgoes withdrawing for rest and ministers to the needy, perhaps forgetting that Jesus does withdraw from the crowds, even from his disciples, for periods of rest and deep prayer? Just as in the hidden verses today, after feeding the 5,000, before the next crowd scene: “Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray”.

Can you hear Jesus' voice in this, speaking to you in your business and busy-ness of life, calling out to you to retreat? Can you hear him in your rushing and coming and going? In the life of the church, here? What's the response that more readily rises? Is it: “I have to.....; it's expected of me.....I'll be letting someone/something down if I don't.....if I stop, I might have to face what I'm running from”. Or is there a response struggling for release in you, that says “yes, that's what I need”. Our Lord knows what we need, even when we do not.

Can you enter into the scene in this Scripture today, let go of the compulsions to go, go, go; and to hear Jesus invite you to come away by yourselves to a deserted place; to come and rest a while, to pray, to spend time in the presence of the Lord?

Can you –will you –do just that?