

Rest and Recuperation...

... are essential to keep focus on God.

A sermon given on the Eighth Sunday after Trinity, 21st July 2024 – by the Curate, the Revd Charlie Shefford, in Beverley Minster.

Mark 6:30-34, 53-end

What I'm about to say may be slightly controversial in Beverley Minster: that is, it is a good thing to set aside time regularly to stop work and to rest - this is what we are shown in this morning's gospel. Earlier in Mark's gospel, Jesus commissioned the disciples for a mission, sending them out to cast out demons and to cure the sick and our gospel story this morning begins as the disciples are returning from that mission. On their return, Jesus invites them to rest, saying, *'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.'* And it is in this space between the disciples' mission and rest that Mark calls the disciples 'Apostles' - the only time in the whole gospel that he uses that term. And in the New Testament, an apostle is one who is sent out as a witness to Christ, to teach and to serve and to spread the good news. But it's interesting that in Mark's gospel, he doesn't use the word 'apostle' during the sending out itself or during the mission. But instead, he chooses to use it here in this space right after the disciples are returned from the mission and before their time of rest.

It seems that living out a full apostolic ministry consists both in making Christ known in the world. This means for us today being a visible testament to the transforming power of God's grace. That can mean having a role in the church itself, demonstrating the love and service of Christ in our jobs and lives, spreading the good news, and building up the Kingdom of God here on Earth. But just as importantly, it means setting aside time for rest and reflection. Because if we don't set aside this time, we risk losing sight of God altogether. A full apostolic ministry is a process of sending out, working to build God's Kingdom, and then returning home for rest, reflection, and prayer.

And it is this returning home that sustains us, brings us closer to God, and focuses us on building God's Kingdom. God isn't a brute - He isn't going to force himself into our lives. So if we never rest and reflect, never spend that time with God, then our role in the church, our love and service to others, whatever it may be, becomes detached from God and becomes just a closed series of tasks to complete with no particular meaning or purpose. And over time, we ourselves become the focus rather than God. We end up working not out of love, not out of a desire to build the kingdom, but out of a desire for self-glorification, to work for the sake of work.

Our gospel story continues as Jesus and the disciples set off in their boat for some well-earned rest. But then, as is so often the case, when we're trying to set aside some time for rest, something unexpected happens. Many people in the various towns see them setting off and want to hear what they have to say, want to receive teaching from them. So they run ahead of the boat to meet them at their destination. And these people arriving ahead of time are those who will be present for the feeding of the 5,000. And as I'm sure many of you will know, during the recording of that miracle, only the men present there were recorded, so with the women and children, this could be a crowd of 10,000 people who were standing on the shore as Jesus and the disciples arrived. We are told that Jesus had great compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd and he began to teach them many things. And while Jesus is teaching the crowd the disciples rest, not appearing again until the feeding of the 5,000 much later in the day. I don't think this speaks to the laziness of the disciples, rather a rare example of the gospel of Mark showing their trust and confidence in Christ, their humility before Christ.

To set aside time for rest takes a certain amount of confidence - confidence that God's grace can still move and be at work without you there. The disciples are willing to rest because they know this. And if we refuse to rest, what are we saying? That God's grace cannot abound unless I, in particular, am present? And with this mindset, we again run the risk of making ourselves the focus rather than God. And that's why this cyclical apostolic ministry is so important - being sent out and then resting to remind ourselves of what purpose we were sent out in the first place, and this doesn't mean shirking your responsibilities or living a life of complete and absolute leisure (as tempting as that can be sometimes.)

Of course, there will be times when, like Jesus, your compassion for the crowd may mean you have to delay your rest for a while. But it doesn't mean going without rest altogether - it means finding true peace and quiet in your times of rest and not feeling guilty for resting after you've returned home from the mission.

Reading Text

³⁰ The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ He said to them, '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. ³² And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴ As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

⁵³ When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. ⁵⁴ When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, ⁵⁵ and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶ And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.