

Year B Proper 16

Jeremiah 23: 1-6

Ephesians 2: 11-22

Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

Rest a While

When I read today's lectionary readings, and especially the gospel reading, I had a sense that we are being asked to focus on what it takes for each of us to grow in our faith. The Collect we heard earlier also neatly summarises the readings. We prayed that God may sow in our hearts the love of God's name, so that we can nurture the things that are good and tend to them. Let's look at this in relation to the gospel reading.

Our gospel reading is from two different parts of chapter 6 of Mark's gospel. The section from verse 30 -34 describes the excited apostles, recounting to Jesus all that they had done after Jesus had commissioned them to go out in pairs and heal the sick and cast out demons.

This section reminds me what it was like when my daughters would go away for a few days or the first time they went to the school camp for five whole days! When they came back both of them found it hard to draw breath due to the excitement of telling us the stories of all they did. And at sporadic times over the next few days, as they remembered something else that had happened they would get animated all over again and recount another story.

Jesus was no doubt happy to hear the disciples stories, and to an extent share in their enjoyment and wonder at the healing they did. But I do wonder how the disciples told their stories, was at all, 'I did this..., I did that..?' Or was it 'I was able to do this because of the power of God and the Holy Spirit that you gave me'? I suspect in their excitement it may have been more of the latter, with stories about 'I did' or 'we did', and no recognition of the power invested in them. And we know that they were only able to do these healings because Jesus had given them authority over the unclean spirits and to heal the sick. Without that power and authority resting on them, they would have been ineffectual.

This section comes immediately after the murder of John the Baptist, Jesus's cousin. The juxtaposition of the news of John's death and the arrival back of the excited apostles must have been hard to bear. Thus it always is in life; when we are coming to terms with the death of a loved one it can be hard to hear and be joyous with good news in someone else's life.

Jesus' response to the apostles excited and probably self-absorbed return should not surprise us. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while". In my mind's eye, as I reflected on this, I sense that Jesus needs to rest, and knows that his disciples need to as well. This is not just physical rest, but mental and spiritual rest. Jesus knew that this was essential – that the disciples re-focus not on themselves, but on God. The God from whom flowed the gifts of healing, and to whom the disciples need to acknowledge and give thanks. Their actions were only possible through God's power and might. If the disciples tried to repeat their healing ministry without God's authority, it would be ineffective.

However, even though they got in a boat to avoid the crowds to get to a deserted place, the crowds were so in need of Jesus' teaching and healing ministry that they worked out where they were heading and at least 5,000 men gathered before them on a hillside. That rather ruined Jesus' planned retreat with the disciples. In his limitless and self-emptying love, Jesus had compassion for the crowd of 5,000, so began 'teaching them many things'.

Our gospel reading skips the rest of that encounter – the miraculous feeding of the 5,000 and then Jesus walking on the sea of Galilee – and picks up the story as Jesus and the disciples arrive in Genesaret, and again Jesus is surrounded by people from across the countryside seeking healing for the sick. Wherever Jesus went around the countryside he healed, including those who touched the hem of his cloak.

Although we skipped the feeding of the 5,000 we know the disciples didn't understand the limitless power, grace and mercy of God, despite witnessing first hand the actions that took place. If they had had time to rest, to pray, and talk with Jesus they would have been more receptive, more able to learn; their hearts may have absorbed more of the love of God.

Today's gospel reading is a timely reminder that Jesus understood the balance between action and prayer, between action and contemplation. He totally understood the human capacity to be self-absorbed, to construct an ego which

would then need defending, to quickly lose the connection with God, to see everything as if it was all of our making and doing.

In Mark's gospel it is so easy to get caught up in the action. Mark's gospel is the shortest of the four, and he packs in action after action, with hardly any respite to draw breath. We can read his gospel as a story of successive actions and healings, carried out in urgency because Jesus' time was so short, to complete his mission. It can encourage us to view Jesus as constantly moving and doing, and hardly ever stopping to draw breath and pray to God, to find time to reflect and just 'be'. But even in Mark's gospel we know Jesus does find time to retreat from 'the world' he inhabited, early in the morning, away from the crowds. And we know Jesus got his disciples to do likewise, even if in this week's readings he wasn't successful, due to the needs of the local population, driving them to be alert to Jesus' movements and ready to carry the sick, at a moment's notice, should Jesus arrive close to where they lived.

And Jesus needed that time alone; in quiet, in reflection, in prayer, to acknowledge God's power and might, God's endless grace, mercy and compassion, and to prayerfully discern the next steps in his ministry.

And so, what about us, and of course, when I sat down to write this, what about me. It will come as no surprise to you all that I sit more on the action-side of the continuum than on the contemplative. I confess I don't have this in balance. I know it is part of my DNA, but also part of my upbringing. It has its dangers... taking action with little prayer beforehand; doing too much and burning out; making people hesitant to contact me 'because I am busy'. In our culture, being busy, normally equates to being physically active, whereas it is perfectly acceptable to be busy seemingly 'doing nothing'.

As I get older – boy, I must be a very slow learner – I have come to learn that 'doing' all the time is not good. Time to 'be', time to be with God, to allow thoughts and prayer to form, to sense the Holy Spirit's nudges, is an essential aspect of my life. My action-oriented self prefers to be walking in God's creation rather than sitting in a chair at such times, or to let my head get lost in some wonderful music; classical, beautiful choral polyphony such as Tallis, or singing a Taizé chant, works for me. And yes, I can sometimes sit quietly in a chair, to be with God.

I wonder what works for you? As we consider the busyness described in the gospel reading, as we consider Jesus' desire to draw the disciples away from

action for a while after their first healing missions, as we consider our own propensities and the influences on us that shape our lives, I invite you to reflect on how you may best be able to receive what we prayed for in the collect today.

What do you need to do to be receptive to God's message and loving presence? How frequently do you think you need to find the time and space to do this? How can you find the time and build this up to be a natural habit?

- ✝ How can you create time and space so that God stands a chance of sowing and topping-up God's love in your heart, so that you can share it with others?
- ✝ How can you create time and space so that God can guide you and enable you to grow in your life of faith?
- ✝ How can you create time and space so that God can lovingly guide you to know what is good?
- ✝ How can you create time and space so that you can nurture those things God has shown you are good?
- ✝ Finally, and critically, how can you create time and space so that you can receive God's loving care, and know that you are loved by God, just as you are?

Even after 16 months of COVID, when it may seem very strange to talk about retreating from the busyness of life, how we intentionally use time for being in the presence of God, rather than being busy or bored, is important.

We are all children of God, all wondrously made, and wondrously different. I pray you find a way to spend time with God, in love and peace.

The Collect for the 8th Sunday after Pentecost

O God of power and might, all good things belong to you:
Sow in our hearts the love of your name, and make us grown in the life of faith;
nurture the things that are good, and tend them with your loving care;
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you,
In the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end.
Amen.