

Renewing our Strength

(Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23)

I don't know about you, but I'm weary, weary of lockdown. Tired of the restrictions. Drained by the constant emotional onslaught. Weary with the monotony of lockdown.

And I'm retired! I hate to think what it is like for you who are working from home, especially if you are home schooling as well. You must be getting worn down trying to keep all the plates spinning at once.

Let's face it - lockdown can be exhausting. Hands up...

Because it is relentless, isn't it? And I think that there must have been times when it was relentless for Jesus too. We had a glimpse of it in our gospel reading from Mark. But we also get a glimpse of Jesus's remedy for dealing with tiredness and exhaustion – and the perhaps surprising result!

But on this one day Jesus goes to the synagogue, has an altercation with an unclean spirit and heals a man, goes on immediately to Simon's house, heals his mother-in-law, has – phew! - an opportunity to relax with his new friends during the afternoon before, at around 6 pm, "the whole city" gathers at the door leading Jesus to hold a major healing crusade. He must have been exhausted!

So what did he do the next day? Have a lie in? Take a day off? No, he got up early - very early! Voluntarily! Not because he had to; because he wanted to. Because he needed to.

Jesus seems to have been very intentional about it:

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

Jesus didn't just get up early. Since it was still very dark, it was maybe around 4.00 a.m. Sure, he may well have got his 7 or 8 hours sleep by then but even so Jesus got up while it was still very dark, apparently before the others in the household. Because the disciples had to go hunting for him to find him.

And Jesus didn't just get up; he went out to a deserted place. I guess he wanted to be alone and undisturbed, because he had a specific purpose in mind: to pray.

Now, I don't know about you but the last thing I want to do intentionally after an exhausting and tiring day is get up early, and certainly not at 4.00 a.m., even after an early night, and definitely not to pray.

When we think of prayer I think that usually we think of petition or intercession; asking God for something. And I am sure that Jesus did that too. I guess that he prayed for those who had witnessed the healing in the synagogue, and for those he healed the night before. No doubt he prayed too for his disciples.

But I suspect that this was not the only way that Jesus prayed in those early hours. I don't think that Mark would have thought it worthy of recording it if it was.

No, I think that Jesus was “*waiting upon the LORD*” as at the end of our Old Testament reading.

Let’s look at that a moment.

Isaiah writes that the Lord, who never tires or grows weary, can pass on strength to those who do. And we all do. Even Jesus got tired. Remember how he fell asleep in the boat during the storm on the Sea of Galilee?

“*Those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength*” (Isaiah 40:3 NKJV). Scholars tell us that the verb translated as “renew” has the sense of an exchange. It is not our innate strength that is renewed by the waiting. It is his strength that is given to us in exchange for our weariness.

And this is not a once in a lifetime transaction, as we see from the way Jesus got tired and the accounts of him frequently withdrawing to pray.

So I think that what Jesus was doing that morning was waiting on the LORD.

Those who wait on the LORD renew their strength. They exchange weariness for God’s strength. They become reinvigorated. They mount up with wings like eagles. Here the sense is either that their wings are given strength and power that is lacking or that they are given wings that they did not already have in order to soar.

Actually “*waiting on the LORD*” is the King James translation. But the word can also be translated as “*wait for*” as we heard in the Old Testament reading. This gives the sense of trusting God, of not trying to hurry him, of knowing that he is in control.

Whether Jesus was waiting on or waiting for God I think he was having a conversation with his Father. Maybe he asked his Father what he should be doing next. Should he consolidate his evidently successful ministry in Capernaum and wait for it to ripple outwards? Was that his mission?

And I have a notion that the Father said “Yes, well done Son; that was a good gig. But now I want you to go around the whole of Galilee and take our message to more people and to those further away.”

Whatever was said Jesus was encouraged, his strength was renewed, and he seems to have had a new, or renewed, commission. He was reinvigorated by his time of prayer. We see that because when the disciples *said to him, ‘Everyone is searching for you.’ He answered, ‘Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also.*

The result of Jesus time of prayer was a new impetus to his ministry. He had a renewed imperative to get the news of the break-in of the kingdom of God to as many people as possible.

The Apostle Paul shared this imperative. He wrote “*I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some.*”

Paul felt a compulsion to share the gospel of Jesus Christ, just like Jesus when he left his successful ministry in Capernaum to travel throughout Galilee proclaiming and demonstrating his message. And I guess we should feel the same compulsion to share the good news with those in the community around us.

Those who wait on the LORD renew their strength. I don't think that we should feel guilty when we are weary or failing to soar. But I do think that we should take encouragement to wait on the LORD.

How do we do that? Well I am definitely not the best person to answer that question. But I do know that we need to give time to it. For most of us that means getting away to a quiet place, away from distractions, in order consciously to spend time in God's presence.

That's what Jesus did, even though he knew his Father intimately.

Being still in God's presence and waiting on him is a discipline. Personally I find it easiest if I ask God questions and write down what I think he is saying. In fact Habakkuk was told by God to write down what he saw in response to his conversation with God (Habakkuk 2:1-2).

So I take encouragement from our gospel reading where I surmise that this is just what Jesus was doing (without the writing down bit of course)! He was discussing his ministry with his Father and receiving a course of action as a result.

Now before I finish I want you to hear a couple of testimonies. The first is a short video clip from Peter Woodfield talking about waiting for God. The second is from Carna who will talk about how she waits on the LORD in the course of everyday life.

I hope we all feel encouraged to wait on the LORD more than we are doing, and maybe hear how he would commission us. Of course, that could be a scary thing!

Markie Woodfield has produced a very helpful bookmark entitled "Listening to God Guidelines" which I personally use from time to time. These guidelines too suggest that, after stilling ourselves and consciously coming into God's presence, we ask him questions. If anyone would like a copy I will happily arrange for you to have one.

Amen

Chris Shaw, 7 February 2021