

Sunday between 17th and 23rd July [16]

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Our readings this morning speak of finding rest in the midst of work. The story in 2 Samuel is a reminder that it is God who guides our work and as such we can rest in God's strength and the letter of St Paul to the church at Ephesus reminds us that our peace is in Christ, so we are able to be people who pursue and enjoy peace as part of our calling despite our differences and backgrounds.

Then we come to the gospel reading, and here the focus is on rest. Jesus is reeling from the news of the death of John the Baptist and the disciples are recently returned from their missionary journeys where they, for the first time, did the work of church leaders without Jesus right next to them, they taught and healed the sick, they preached and spread God's love amongst strangers. So Jesus sees that it is time to rest and he proposes that they go as a small group to a lonely place, physically removed from what is familiar and from other people, and recuperate from their work.

It is impossible to overstate how important that is, in all areas of life but also in ministry, to rest and take care of our spiritual needs. It is often assumed of clergy and sometimes they are asked if Sunday is their busiest day but for most it is not. At least for most it is not the busiest day in terms of the time spent out of the house, or the hours worked in any tangibly recognisable way. But it is the most tiring day. Although clergy spend some days constantly on the go from one service, to a meeting, to a visit, to some office work, back to a meeting and so on, it is still a Sunday that they find somehow most tiring. We can speculate on why that might be, but the likely answer is that there is an emotional cost to leading worship, to praying for and on behalf of others, and to receiving from a congregation the needs and expectations they have for their minister. It might also be that busy weeks catch up with clergy on Sundays, but the first explanation seems far more likely. Doing the public worship part of ministry is exhausting in a different way from lifting heavy things, chairing meetings or creatively writing and preparing paperwork.

That is why Jesus wanted the disciples to rest immediately after their first foray into ministry. It is unlikely that they worked physically harder than they had done in the past, some of these men were fishermen who dragged heavy nets full of fish for a living, but this would be a new type of tired for them to process and Jesus recognised that.

Of course they were unable to get clear of the crowd to begin with and Jesus recognised the crowd as scattered sheep without a shepherd, and he took pity on them and taught them. We missed out a whole section where Jesus feeds the 5000, because we are saving that miracle until next week, but we are told Jesus did not leave these sheep lost, despite the tiredness and the disciples' need for rest, the needs of the people came first, such is the radical generosity of God's love.

Eventually they find a place to fast and pray as they spent time coming to terms with what had gone on before. In some places this is called pastoral reflection and it is

very good to learn about how to effectively reflect on our pastoral encounters in order to make sense of them and to learn and grow because of them, but at its simplest form it is the same thing as is described here, taking time to stop and think about what has gone on and through prayer and meditation to process the experiences we have for the benefit of our future ministry. But in order to do that we need to make time and space.

Now it would be very easy to go away from this sermon and think that you had received a glimpse into why clergy always look tired and why they sometimes seem to take ages to return emails and phone calls. Hopefully these words don't come over as having a bit of a whinge about how busy ministry can be, because that is so far away from the purpose or intention of my words. Ministry is tiring and busy but this is not about the clergy.

One of the joys of being clergy is that we know about the need for rest and recuperation, we know about pastoral reflection and using the pastoral cycle to intentionally and critically reflect and improve our encounters, we know that sometimes things happen that require our attention and other things can wait. This sermon is for everyone else. If the work of ministry is a work of all the baptised, which we believe it is, then we all need to be aware of this. If ministry causes us to give of ourselves spiritually in such a way that we are left exhausted by it sometimes then we must recognise that and make provision in our lives to take care of ourselves. And if we believe that ministry in the church is God's then we must involve God in it at all times through prayer.

Evidence shows that growing parishes, either measured by numerical growth or depth of discipleship growth, are places where everything they do is underpinned by prayer. What that means is, in each of these places the people, or a sub-section of them, take time daily, weekly or monthly to intentionally stop the busyness and let God into the planning and implementation of ministry. We can all benefit from recognising the value of rest, meditation and prayer, it is what refreshes the tiredness of spiritual work just as sleep refreshes the tiredness of physical work. And the days when you are too busy to stop and pray are the days when you need to stop and pray the most.