

A TIME TO REST

Jeremiah 23. 1-6
Ephesians 2. 11-22
Mark 6. 30-34, 53-56

I speak to you † in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

We all lead very busy lives, do we not? Some of us are working at full- or part-time jobs; some of us are now retired; and others of us have family-related or other responsibilities that take up our time each day. Whatever our situation might be, we are still busy people. Indeed, our modern Western culture has more than encouraged us to be so; to the extent that some of us (and I include myself in this category) may actually feel uncomfortable if we don't have too many things to do.

When the disciples returned from their mission of preaching the good news and ministering to those who were in need, they gathered around Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. The crowds of people had kept them so busy that they didn't even have time to eat; and hearing this, Jesus said to them that they must now go to a "deserted place" and rest. This encouragement to *rest* was part of Jesus' training of his disciples. He wanted them to learn that without sufficient rest, there can be no effective ministry and service. We remember, don't we, that in his own ministry Jesus often took time out and went to a deserted place to rest and to pray.¹

Jesus wanted to protect his disciples from over-exposure. He knew how excited they were, because they had discovered that they could teach and minister with a power that they had never known before. But Jesus also knew the physical, emotional and spiritual limits of his disciples; he wanted to protect them from exhaustion. As Jesus had taught and performed his astonishing miracles, his disciples had clearly seen that

¹ Cf. Mk 1. 35, 45.

he had resources that were beyond their own; indeed, in the passage of Mark 6 that the Lectionary skips over today, Jesus will go on to feed the five thousand and to walk on water. The disciples were not to imagine that they too, could go on endlessly. Jesus knew that they needed *rest*; they needed time to be quiet; time to recover; time to be re-wired and re-created spiritually, as it were.

The theme of rest is very significant in the Scriptures. Many of us will think immediately of the 23rd Psalm, in which God as a shepherd makes the psalmist lie down (literally) by *waters of rest*, so that his soul can be restored (23. 2, 3). After the Israelites had wandered in the wilderness for forty years, the Lord brought them into a promised land that was to be a place of rest.² In the gospel of St Matthew, Jesus promises rest to all who are weary (11. 28-29); and in the book of Hebrews, final rest from toils and persecution is promised to all of God's people (4. 9-11).

Rest is essential to keeping balance in the Christian life. As Christians, we come into the presence of God for refreshment, renewal and guidance, and then are equipped to go and reach out to other people. The Christian learns to go to God with *people* in his or her heart, and then to go the people with *God* in his or her heart. Not one of us can expend ourselves for people for ever; there needs to be time for rest and renewal. If we have not spent time with God, we will not be able to introduce others to him.

There are two main dangers for everyone. The first one, of course, is that of constant activity (and some church groups are like that). No-one can work without rest: we cannot proclaim God unless we spend time quietly before him. Many Christians run out of resources, or even faith, because they have not learnt to be still and quiet before God. Sometimes our God is hindered from being our source of strength, because we are not still enough and quiet enough before him.

² Cf. Exod 33. 1-14; Deut 12. 9-10; Josh 1. 13; Jer 31. 2.

The second danger is that of too much withdrawal, although most churches cannot be criticised for this. Devotion should lead to action. Awareness of God and his love should make us proclaim his goodness; prayer should lead to work. To turn to God is not to *turn away* from our fellow beings, but to prepare us for caring and sharing with them in a better way.

Strangely enough, the rest that Jesus sought to give his disciples was short-lived. When Jesus and his disciples went away in the boat, the boat had a four-mile journey to cross the lake (or Sea of Galilee); and this journey was a ten-mile walk for the crowd. Despite this, some of the crowd actually set off and got to the deserted place as quickly as Jesus did. The boat journey turned out to be the only time of rest for Jesus and his team. As Jesus went ashore, he had compassion for the crowd; because they were like sheep without a shepherd.

One way of describing compassion is to call it merciful love. This is one of our God's qualities. As God looks upon us, he understands our weakness and frailty. If somehow we feel that we have lost our way, we can come to him in a *restful time of quiet* and receive guidance; we can ask him for help so that we do not get lost again.

As God our shepherd looks upon us, he also realises full well that without his care, we will not have the nourishment that we need. As we come to him in a *restful time of quiet*, he is able to give us spiritual refreshment. He is able to give us resources that we cannot generate on our own; he is able to fill our spiritual emptiness with *himself* and to give our lives a new meaning.

And finally, as God our shepherd looks upon us, he understands that we need protection. As we come to him in a *restful time of quiet*, we can ask him (to use the words that we just heard from Jeremiah) to bring us back to the fold, so that we may

be safe, fruitful and grow. Dear friends, it is essential that we learn afresh what it means to *rest in the Lord*. †