

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 18th July 2021
The Seventh Sunday after Trinity

Collect

Generous God,
you give us gifts and make them grow:
though our faith is small as mustard seed,
make it grow to your glory
and the flourishing of your kingdom;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'

Mark 6:30-34, 53-end

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. 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. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. 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.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. 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.

Sermon

“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” Let’s just pause for a moment with those words. “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”

A culture of busyness has been a part of our lives for some years. I wonder how often you ask someone how they are, and the reply is that they are “busy” – and perhaps that is your answer, too. In fact a few weeks ago, a friend of mine said that their colleague had used the term “super-busy”, almost as a badge of honour. I guess that’s a whole new level. Busyness is in many ways a disease of our current age.

When I was teaching young people about the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions, I remember explaining that the creation of machinery was meant to enable us to have more leisure time. And yet here we are, in the twenty-first century, not only with a long hours culture in many workplaces, but also with a sense that we need to squeeze every moment out of that hard-earned leisure time.

Perhaps the last 18 months have changed our priorities, though it’s probably far too soon to tell. It has been heartening to hear of those people who have valued spending precious time with their children, instead of sitting on a crowded commuter train for several hours a day. Likewise, with so many leisure facilities closed, a lot of people have found that free time is spent in the local park or garden. Perhaps some of us have learnt how to take our feet off the gas; how to rest.

So now, as the world begins to open up, and our diaries are probably becoming fuller once again, perhaps it is a good time to hold onto those words of Jesus: “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” Are there things you discovered during lockdown that you want to hold on to – perhaps the appreciation of simplicity, or the value of time to stop? And, just as significant, are you aware that actually lockdown has been far from restful? That you are as exhausted as ever?

There are many factors that can get in the way of rest. Perhaps high on the list is a sense of duty. Many of us were brought up to take responsibility; to get the jobs done before having time off; to notice when others are in need and do whatever we can; to feel guilty if we are spending time, in that wonderful phrase “doing nothing”. It’s also fair to say that rest is not necessarily all that easy to come by. Even if we are able to empty our diaries, sometimes we find that our minds are far from at rest. Often we fill our diaries with activities because time spent with our minds whirring is far less restful than having things to do.

And yet I still want us to return to those wonderful words: “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”

I wonder what rest would be like for you. Can you imagine it? What does it feel like? What does it look like? Perhaps you can associate particular places with rest. Or it might be that you can always find rest with certain people – or, indeed, on your own.

If rest isn’t something you get much of at the moment, I wonder what it is that gets in the way. What it is that would need to change to make it possible. When Jesus said to his disciples “come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while” it’s because rest matters. I don’t want you to hear that as a threat, because if you are in need of rest and feel unable to get any, the last thing you need is anyone adding to the pressure you are already feeling. What I do want you to hear, though, is that

you don't have to feel guilty for "doing nothing." In fact, it's sometimes worth holding onto that rather wonderful idea of mindfulness: "don't just do something; sit there."

There are so many things in this morning's readings to comfort and encourage us. Permission to simply "do nothing" is among them. Yet, as the reading continues, we are reminded that it wasn't easy for Jesus to find rest. No sooner has he taken his disciples away to a deserted place to rest a while than they find themselves joined at the shore by a great crowd. And if you're one of those people who struggles to say no, you're not alone. Jesus is overcome with compassion for the crowd, so we have to hope that he found sufficient rest on the boat.

We do have evidence, though, that rest was important to Jesus and the disciples. However long they were on that boat, and whatever rest they were able to get, what we discover is that, as a result, Jesus had sufficient energy to feed 5000 people. (That's the part of the gospel reading that has been omitted – we will hear about it next week.) Which is a reminder that it is actually from our rest that we are better able to serve. We all know that the more tired we get, the less patience we have and indeed the less energy we have. Our bodies know that we need rest. Sometimes we just need to listen.

And as Jesus shows us time and again, times of rest can also be times of drawing closer to God. One of the things that I often discover on retreat is that I spend a lot of time sleeping. And once my body has had rest, the prayer begins to flow. It's as though I have made space for God.

I wonder if you have ever had the experience of having a conversation with someone who is being constantly distracted, perhaps by something that is on the television; perhaps by their telephone pinging with messages; perhaps because you just know that their mind is elsewhere. Sometimes I think that God must always be having that kind of conversation with us, because there is always something else distracting us. Allowing ourselves to rest is a gift. A gift to our bodies. A gift to ourselves. And a gift to God because it might just enable us to have a conversation in which God is our only focus.

God wants us to find rest because that is what enables us to build a relationship with God and thereby discover who we truly are.

Amen