



## THE IMPORTANCE OF DOING NOTHING

**EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST -18<sup>th</sup> July 2021** Readings: Jeremiah 23:1-16; Psalm 23; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Jesus had sent his disciples two by two on a mission. On their return they report everything “they had done and taught” (Mk 6:30). Jesus suggests they take a break from their demanding schedule. “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while” (6:31). Mark says, “For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.” When life is busy, we can identify with that. So off they go to a deserted place by themselves – quiet, peaceful, and calm. Mark says it didn’t last long. “[M]any saw them going and recognised them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them” (Mk 6:33).

Imagine you set out on holidays. You arrive at your destination to find those rels or neighbours – the ones you don’t get on with. Or you’re a doctor and a crowd of patients is there waiting to see you. Or you’re a teacher and there are your students. Or a counsellor and a bunch of clients is waiting for an appointment.

Or a priest and there are your parishioners. Or a mechanic and your customers are waiting to have their cars fixed.

But these little episodes in Mark's Gospel are about more than spoiled or interrupted holidays. Let's focus on Jesus' saying to his disciples after a busy period, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." Some people see Christian faith as a duty or a demand – Do this! Don't do that! Come to church more! Give more! – rather than as a gracious invitation. What if we saw our Christian faith more in terms of *not* doing this or that? Bishop (now Archbishop of York) Stephen Cottrell wrote a book called, *Do Nothing to Change Your Life: Discovering What Happens When You Stop*.

Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for humanity; not humanity for the Sabbath." Any command, any rule given by God is always for our benefit, our enjoyment, and our flourishing and *not* to make life difficult, burdensome, and joyless.

The fourth commandment is about the Sabbath. It's the longest one, taking up nearly a third of the entire Decalogue. In a book on the Sabbath, Rabbi Abraham Heschel says the Sabbath is the only thing in God's creation called holy. Everything else is called 'good'. Only the Sabbath is called 'holy'.

God ceasing and resting from his work of creation on the seventh day reminds us that we, who are created in God's image, need times when we cease work. Heschel says, "Observing the Sabbath has always kept God's people from being absorbed by the alien cultures where they resided . . . Even as slaves in Egypt they observed Sabbath.

"For six days of the week they belonged to Pharaoh, but on the seventh they were free men and women who belonged to God. The Sabbath was not a day simply for recovering their strength. It was not free time. It was freedom time. It was time to recover their identity, time to remember who and whose they were."

We may not be slaves in Egypt, but we live in a world that sees us as consumers and commodities. We are valued for what we can do rather than for who we are. As pastor, scholar and author Eugene Peterson says, "Not persons created in the image of God but equipment for making bricks and building pyramids. Humanity was defaced.

"Lest any of us do that to our neighbor or husband or wife or child or employee, we are commanded to keep a sabbath! The moment we begin to see others in terms of what they can *do* rather than who they *are*, we mutilate humanity and violate community . . . Sabbath-keeping is elemental kindness. Sabbath-keeping is commanded to preserve the image of God in our neighbours so that we see them as they are, not as we need them or want them."

Our world has many needs and problems. I've lived long enough to have seen many efforts by the Church to be viable and relevant in preaching the Good News of Jesus. Some have enjoyed short term effectiveness; others have died quickly. Dr Scott Cowdell, Anglican priest and professor, calls them 'desperate measures.'

Today's section of Mark's Gospel identifies very simply the basics of the Church's ministry and mission. It must be fuelled, sustained, and nurtured by prayer and times of Sabbath. After feeding the crowds with a few loaves and fishes, Jesus makes sure there's no litter, dismisses the crowd and sends his disciples

across the lake in a boat while he goes up the mountain to pray. Mark says Jesus had compassion when he saw the crowds. But he didn't ask first off, "What have we got to eat?" rather, "he began to teach them many things." Prayer, teaching and preaching, and deeds of loving service. There it is.

It's tempting to think sometimes that it's all up to us to solve the problems of the world and the church and our families. Hard work and dedication must be balanced by taking time out spent with God. It reminds us that we are not the centre of the universe, we are not indispensable. God is in charge, and we are not God.

Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor says, "Sabbath is not useless time. It is time we use. It is time we stop in order to remember.... Sabbath reminds us that we are creatures and not the creator .... [The] refusal to stop is idolatry, the attempt to be God. We even sin against Sunday, turning it into just another day of ceaseless activity."

Jesus calls us to come away and be still and silent; to be present and to allow God to be present to us, to rejuvenate and be restored. The lockdown can be a time to do just that. Remember this is not just good sense; Jesus invites us to do so.

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