

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

18.07.2021
By Brec Seaton

Introduction

Jesus has been ministering in Galilee, and today's Gospel reading sees the beginning of his withdrawal from there. In the verses prior to our reading, Jesus has sent the disciples out in pairs to teach and heal the sick. Today's passage begins with the moment the disciples come back together with Jesus; it then bypasses the following stories of the feeding of the 5000, and Jesus walking on water and rejoins the disciples at Gennesaret. The reflection considers what Jesus meant when he invited the disciples to come and rest for a while: was this rest from physical exhaustion, or – after a time of success – a place to refocus and look into the face of the God?

Text

Mark 6:30–35, 53–56

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 marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Comment

On this their first mission to the towns and villages without Jesus, the disciples

have preached repentance, cast out demons, and anointed the sick who were then healed. Now the disciples are crowding around Jesus. Excited and enthused, they are in a rush to tell him all that they have achieved. And in this is the conflict and tension – they are telling Jesus what they have done, their successes – but where is God in the story?

It is easy to read these familiar verses quickly, to glance over them and assume that having heard all about this exhausting work, Jesus was seeking to take care of the disciples' need for physical and emotional rest. And yet a closer look indicates that Jesus recognises the disciples' need to rest in order to refocus on God – to put God back into the centre.

The disciples now have a following for the crowds recognise 'them' and hurry ahead to meet 'them'. Yet despite the confidence that the disciples have gained from their recent experiences of teaching and healing the sick, it is Jesus, not the disciples, who has compassion on the crowd and begins to teach them. The presence Jesus has with the crowd is exhibited through his noticing the humanity of others. Jesus looks into the face of those around him and sees their need, and there is no notion that Jesus does any of this to glorify himself, to be able to say to the disciples – 'look at what 'I' have done and taught'.

As time passes, the disciples want Jesus to send the crowd away so they can buy food. However Jesus responds by asking the disciples to feed the crowd. The disciples do not see how this is possible, again, despite their recent successes. And so Jesus performs a miracle – and in doing so removes the disciples from being central to the story – instead they turn to watch Jesus – they refocus on the power and compassion of God.

After the feeding of the 5000, Jesus puts the disciples into another boat – while he himself goes to pray... and he does not encourage the disciples to go with him to do likewise. He knows that despite seeing the teaching and feeding of the 5000, they are not yet ready to turn to God in prayer. To seek the presence of God with no other distractions. The Society of Friends say

*'Do you set aside times of quiet for openness to the Holy Spirit? All of us need to find a way into silence which allows us to deepen our awareness of the divine and to find the inward source of our strength. Seek to know an inward stillness, even amid the activities of daily life...'**

On this second boat journey, the wind becomes strong and the disciples are afraid – and as they look up, they see Jesus walking towards them on the water – they look towards Jesus, at first afraid. Once again they turn their faces towards God.

When they reach shore, there is yet another crowd gathering, but this time the disciples are not central to the story. This crowd is desperate to see Jesus (people at once recognised 'him'). This is not the time of rest that Jesus spoke about the disciples needing in the first few verses of our passage. This is again a time to refocus on God as the sick are healed even by touching Jesus' cloak.

Jesus is again central to the story.

Resting in the presence of God helps our face to remain turned towards Christ, and not on our own achievements. Jesus knew the importance of this, and here in this passage he is continuing to teach his disciples to know the importance of this too – for there will be a time when they are the ones to continue his teachings and to

perform miracles in his name. A time to pray is a time to listen. *‘The right to speak is a call to the duty of listening. Speech has no meaning unless there are attentive minds and silent hearts’*** . A place to be in the presence of God. A place of refreshment and rest.

In this passage, when Jesus says ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while’, he was telling his disciples that they needed spiritual rest – to enter into the presence of God and refocus their minds. To look into the face of the one who gave them power and authority to heal the sick, power to cast out demons, to teach the good news of the Kingdom of God. Taking time out, for rest and renewal, to re-centre and re-focus, is a vital element of self-care, both within and outside of conflict situations.

* Quaker Faith & Practice, fifth edition, Advices and Queries 1.02 number 3

** Pierre Lacout 1969 in Quaker Faith & Practice, fifth edition, 2.12

Response

How often do you put yourself central to a story? How easy do you find it to sit on the edge of a story and look in from a new perspective?

Where do you go to fix your eyes on Jesus? Where is this Sacred Space where you are alone with Christ: to hear the words Christ has for you; to be in the presence of the divine?

You are invited to follow [this link](#) to hear Brec Seaton speaking about her sacred space – the place to go and rest before God. The place to focus on Christ. A place to Be with Jesus.

As you listen, ask yourself where you go to be in this place – the place that you meet with God without distraction. Where your face is turned towards the beauty of Christ.

Prayer

To look into Your face is to see compassion and love
A place of rest and restoration
A place to be in the presence of Christ
To be silent and hear Your voice

When I struggle to rest in Your company

Show me the path that leads to stillness with You
And when I emerge from Your glorious presence
May I stay focused on You
That Your Kingdom my come to those I meet today.
Amen

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: