

## **Sermon 'Rest a while'**

### **Mark 6:30-34, 53-56**

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"Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." That is what Jesus said to his followers. After a period of hard work, they needed a retreat. To rest for a while. And this is language we understand. 'You really need a little holiday'.

#### **1 Jesus invites us to rest**

Have you had a busy year? The disciples of Jesus certainly had been busy. Jesus had send them two by two though the villages to preach, to heal, to be a blessing for the people. They had now returned to Jesus to tell 'him all that they had done and taught.' It was time for feed back, and Jesus realized how exhausted they were.

The times were difficult. Jesus and his followers worked hard for the benefit of the people, and Jesus was now at the height of his popularity. At the same time, king Herod had just murdered John the Baptist - a sign of the dangerous days for any follower of Jesus.

And when the disciples had come back to Jesus, exhausted, more crowds gathered around them. They did not even have time to eat because of the needs of the people. "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

So they got in a small boat to cross to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. They needed some being-with-Jesus-alone-time.

Working without resting, being busy without taking holidays, that will not do for too long. We do need times off, for relaxing, talking, prayer, meditation. Even Jesus needed that. He needed periods of withdrawal.

What Jesus shows us here is the normal rhythm of the Christian life. The Christian life is a continuous going into the presence of God from the presence of men and coming out into the presence of men from the presence of God. It is like the rhythm of sleep and work. We cannot work unless we have our time of rest; and sleep will not come unless we have worked until we are tired.

Likewise, no-one can live the Christian life unless he gives himself, herself, times with God. We must give God time to recharge us with spiritual energy.

How can we shoulder life's heavy burdens if we have no contact with him who is the Lord of all good life? How can we do God's work unless in his strength? And how can we receive that strength unless we seek in quietness and in loneliness the presence of God?

But there is also the danger of too much withdrawal. Devotion that does not lead to action is not real devotion. Prayer that does not issue in work is not real prayer. We must never seek the fellowship of God in order to avoid serving people but in order to fit ourselves better for it.

The rhythm of the Christian life is the alternate meeting with God in the secret place and serving men in the market place.

The rest that Jesus offers is not just a holiday; he offers rest *with him present*. Jesus-oriented rest.

The Jews, when thinking about rest, thought in the first place of the sabbath. Six days you shall work, and on the seventh day you shall rest.

But Jesus saw the masses of people who were tired by the way of the Pharisees who always gave them more laws, more rules, more 'do-this-and-God-will-be-glad-with-you-advise. Jesus said to these worn out people : come to me, I will give you rest.

He presents himself to us as the alternative sabbath. This does not mean we do not need physical rest, and to have a break every now and then. But for true physical, mental and spiritual rest - we must give space to Jesus in our life.

If our heart is at rest, we are better able to cope with the busyness of life.

So Jesus and his disciples went to the there side of the lake, for some quiet time. A few days of relaxation.... but this was not to be. The crowds followed Jesus and his disciples.

The boat took some time to make the passage, and the people walked a few hours around the lake and they were there even before the boat arrived.

## **2. No rest yet**

Think of the frustrations of the rich and famous, who can never go for a walk without being recognized and harassed. This was Jesus' life now.

"Can't you give Jesus a minute? Just a little break?" I would have shown how displeased I was. It is hard to be surrounded with people all the time.

Any ordinary man would have been intensely annoyed at the demands of the people. The rest Jesus so much desired and which he had so well earned was denied to him. His privacy was invaded.

But Jesus showed compassion. He came to save what is lost. You cannot be like Jesus and not be in the business of helping people.

When people are hurting, it is our ministry to be there, and to bring the people with hurts to the one who can help them.

When Mark sat down to write the story of the life of Jesus, he realized what kept Jesus going. Jesus "saw them as leaderless, kingless folk. As 'sheep without a shepherd'. This is a regular biblical way of describing the people of Israel when they have no leader, no king.

Herod was not much of a king. And the religious leaders of Israel were not much of a help with their sharia. And many people saw in Jesus and his disciples what they could not find elsewhere. So they wanted to be with Jesus. They were lost in life, and they needed someone to lead them.

A sheep without the shepherd cannot find the way. Left to ourselves we get lost in life. Life can be so bewildering. We can stand at some cross-roads and not know what way to take. But Jesus leads us and helps us to make the right choices.

A sheep without the shepherd has no defense against the dangers which threaten it, robbers and wild beasts. Think of our politicians, or religious leaders, or of temptations to not follow the Shepherd. If life has taught us one thing it must be that we cannot live it alone; we need his help.

A sheep without the shepherd cannot find its pasture and its food. In this life we are bound to seek for sustenance. We need the strength which can keep us going; we need the inspiration which can lift us out of ourselves and above ourselves. When we seek it elsewhere our minds are still unsatisfied, our hearts still restless, our souls still unfed. We can gain strength for life only from him who is the living bread.

Maybe you feel like that sheep with no shepherd. Then go to the shepherd - Jesus always has time; he has compassion for people who lost the way in life.

Are there people around you that can be described as sheep without shepherd? How can you help them to find that shepherd?

These are the people we meet; these are the people who came to Jesus. And the disciples had to learn that even the most deserved rest - must sometimes be sacrificed in the face of pressing needs.

Jesus saw the people and he taught them many things. He had a message. People need the message that Jesus preached. And they also needed food for their stomach. Jesus gave them the food they needed.

And after this, Jesus and the disciples returned by boat to the westside of the lake again. The same story again - people came in big numbers with their needs. And Jesus gave, and gave, and gave.

I have to repent of sometimes having negative feelings about the many requests for help I receive every day. And it never stops. Especially requests for medical help, or for food. The basic needs of people. Precisely the areas where Jesus helped the people.

Jesus must have been exhausted at times by the requests of the people, but he continued to love and to give. And he is our Lord. He is our example. We are to love and to give.

### **3. Still we need a break**

A Christian should be ready to sacrifice his time and even his rest in the service of the Gospel; in the service of God; in the service of the people. This attitude of availability will lead us to often change our plans of relaxation for the sake of others.

But we must be wise. We do need breaks. Jesus himself recognized this when he wanted to take his disciples with him for some alone-time.

It is important, when we can, to have a good break. It is great that in our societies we have this idea of weekend, and of holiday. The idea of weekend - a day off - was really God's plan. In the Roman Empire, there was no day off for laborers.

But in Israel, managers were forced by the laws of God to give all people, even their animals, a weekly time of recovery. And when the Roman Empire became evermore christian, it agreed that all people should have Sunday as a day to rest.

May our recovery this summer be focussed on the one who invites all tired people to come to him for rest.

And even during our busy working days, when it seems there is no end to the demands placed on us, we can seek Jesus, the shepherd of our souls. When family-life, work, serving the people feels too overwhelming, seek Him inside, even if that is for 5 minutes per day.

Jesus wanted to take his disciples to a quiet place, where no-one would bother them. He wanted them to find peace and rest in the desert.

In Russia, many Russian orthodox in the past would deep in the forests build little cabins - they called them 'desert', or in Russian, *Poustinia*.

The tired believers would go to these cabins - and some still do it - to find God in the desert - in the *Poustinia*. A place to meet Christ in silence, solitude and prayer.

To have such a physical cabin in the forest, or a special room in your house, can be a great way to withdraw and meet with God to find rest.

But it is also possible to develop such a space of aloneness and silence inside ourselves, to leave the noise and hurried pace of daily life to enter a place of silence and solitude internally.

It is possible to develop a '*poustinia* of the heart,' an interiorized *poustinia*, a silent chamber carried always and everywhere in which to contemplate God within.

In the hectic life of Cairo, this is a great asset. For a priest who is seldom able to really have a relaxing day off, this is very helpful. For you, in your hectic family life, or job, in your serving people, develop this inner sanctuary to find rest - even if it is just a few minutes.

Learn how we can carry our quiet 'desert' - a center of silence - right into the marketplace, into the countless conferences, traffic jams, bus trips—or in a classroom filled with unruly kids.

At any moment of the day we can find solace, rest, if we meet with God through Jesus Christ in our own internal quiet place. Maybe you can use your summer holidays to practice this and make it a precious habit.

I know, it is hard to block out all those external impulses that seem to attack us from all sides all the times - the noise, the people, TV, telephone. To just be alone with ourselves and with our Lord.

### **Conclusion**

And we need this habit - because we know that after our holidays - and they are much too short - we will face the people again, at work, in the streets, everywhere.

These people that have needs - in the first place, the need for a shepherd.

And they need you. To be with them; lovingly, and prepared to give. Just as Jesus did. Who loved and gave, loved and gave, and he never stopped doing this.

**Amen**

