

Sunday 17th May, 2015 – Easter 7

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Focus: Mark 6: 30-44 (Ephesians 1:15-23)

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Psalm 1; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while’

He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile.” For many were coming and going and they had no leisure to even eat.

Now many saw them going, and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.

It's like the paparazzi are following Jesus and the disciples. In my imagination I see Jesus and the disciples getting into their boat, leaving to go to that promised deserted place. Finally lying back, feeling the lapping waves, the cry of the seagull, watching the sun on a spinnaker. The disciples were exhausted. Just before this story they had been sent out by Jesus, 2 by 2, to proclaim the gospel of repentance, with nothing but their dusty sandals, visiting new towns and villages with the message that the Kingdom is at hand. Get ready. Turn around. And it was a cosmic time of healings and spiritual awakenings. So after all that excitement, stress and challenge, now they can finally relax. Now is the time to regroup. Now it's time to begin to integrate these wild experiences of living and proclaiming the Gospel. Who were they becoming? Once just simple fishermen. Once a life of water and catching, and filleting, and selling. Now they are following a man who just keeps amazing them. Keeps challenging them to notice the Kingdom that is as close as their breath. The kingdom that is at hand.

And then, on the horizon they notice something moving along the shoreline. It looks like a dust storm. It sounds like the tramping of hooven beasts. It's moving along towards where they are supposed to be going. A place of seclusion. A place of lonely restoration. A place of healthy desolation, just for a time. Just to recover. To recharge. To unwind. To rest, all by themselves.

Only to be greeted again by need. High needs. Highly demanding people. People so desperate that they would run the LONG way around the sea, and beat them there. By foot. This was no “round the bay in a day” fun run. This was more like a desperate stampede.

It's like a scene in a comedy, is it not?

The comedy of our lives. From one end of the city to another. Pick you up and drop you off at: somebody needs the car at, they were supposed to be here at...I have to get from here to there in 4pm traffic...I'm meeting here at 3 so I could see you on my way back at 5 but I'd only have 20 because I need to pick up at...Just squeezing everything in that I can. So I rush.

Do you rush? I rush. From one thing to the next.

Mother, parent, father, grand parent, sister, brother, friend...rush from here to get there, only to move on and get to the next place, and never truly arrive? That's why at the start of this service, we set some time aside to consciously be still. To let our bodies catch up with racing minds.

Oh, and you don't have to be in the quick of family life or working life to get the rush syndrome, some people who retire, yearn to go back to work, because in retirement they have never been so busy. You've heard that I'm sure. "Do you miss work?" "Oh no, I've got no time to work now!!!"

Now, I'm not saying that this busyness is a bad thing. It's part of our common lives. So...lets listen to each other just for moment:

Turn to the person next to you, just for a moment. Share with them something that made you rush this week. I'm only going to give you 90 seconds before I call Swap over time.

Was there anyone for whom during the week they did not rush?
Between the person you spoke to, who was the busiest: can I see your hands up?

It's incredible eh? Twenty five years ago when I worked in corporate taxation the personal assistant to the Managing Partner taught me a valuable lesson. I would often walk past Jillian's desk. And she would ask, "How are you Ian?" "I'm STRESSED, Jillian, I'm Stressed." I'd say. She's reply "Ian, there's no such thing as STRESS. You're either busy or your not. And, you're either coping with it or you're not."

So I'd go about saying, "I'm busy and I'm not coping!"

This sense of rush. It becomes our norm. A normalizing of the way we go about life. And we become totally unaware of it. Now if I was to ask any of you to think about when you were growing up, was it like this? Was it this fast? This jam packed? Or was there more time? Was it less busy?

The trick I think is that, it may have been a slower pace even 10 years ago: but it probably didn't feel that way. I can't take my mind back, and say that I was any less busy in general.

'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while'
Mark 6:31

It's tempting to think that in the past things were slower. It was a different time. But it was probably not as dramatically different as we might think. We were probably all as busy as we are now: just in a different way. The world we live in now is different in the sense that there has never had so much information coming at us, all at once. With the invention of wi-fi, mobiles, tablets, we have never been this available to each other. This constantly plugged in: Wi-fi-ed: In and on the cloud. So it's new to us all. And it's all so common place. When did the phrase 24/7 come into being?

And these 2000 year old, familiar words
'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while'
Mark 6:31

Ring their eternal truth.
We need to make time to go away
To a deserted place and
Rest a while.

Christian spiritual practice long realized that to live a life of abundance one needed time away, alone, undistracted. For some, like the desert Mothers and Fathers, their quest for solitude was soon over taken by people like you and me, who in the rat race of their lives turned to these

monastics to find answers to the conundrums that plagued them. The desert was, for these wise ones, not the place of escape, but the place of ministry. Ministry, meaning “meeting need” through our **being**, as opposed to our **doing**.

The path to a truly spiritual life is about the choices we make. To ‘*Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while*’ is a choice we make, or are invited to respond to. A conscious activity. Something planned. Something scheduled. Something we learn to diarize. We put in the calendar.

I took my friends George and Margaret to a Benedictine Monastery a few years back, for a whole week, before they turned 80. Both George and Margaret were brought up in very strict Methodist traditions. Prayers at home, not only at Church. Family reading of the Bible. Ministerial check ups on the applications of the week’s Sermon. There was certainly a method the Methodists were famous for. These were people for whom prayer was not a foreign way of life. But neither of them could fathom the seclusion of monastic life: the daily the 7 fold offices of prayer in the monastic day. Vigils at 4am, Lauds at 6 am, until Compline at 7pm. What does a Monastic do? They pray. That’s their job. In between these offices of prayer, the monastics go about the business of the community’s life.

But in a monastery the silence is very loud. The silence is shocking. My ears ring with the sound of quiet. I’m fidgety and wondering what to do with myself for a few days. I don’t know how to stop. During the week, George shared with me how he noticed he was shifting, finding stillness in the monastic rhythm of the day of prayer and work.

I wonder what it would be if you stopped?
How would you go with it?

I wonder if we’re afraid that if we stop, something will happen.
Like we’ll fall apart emotionally. We’ll come apart at the seams.
You’ve seen the bumper sticker: Jesus is coming: Look busy!!

I wonder if we’re even aware of the rush we are in? And that if we stopped we might find something we’ve been running from: or running with?
Like we might discover a fear, that the 2 fish and 5 loaves we have isn’t enough?

In this period in the life of the Church in this country where formal religion, like church-life is shrinking, we worry about its survival. I can’t hear the stampede to our door. I can’t see the dust storm of people rushing down Sydney Road to find us. And the temptation is to do more. Get busy: but I’d like to encourage us in a different direction. In a world already so caught up in the busyness of doing, we are invited to a different rhythm. And we invite others into a different rhythm also.

You’ll get left
behind !



How
WONDERFUL.



The opening cartoon: just one of a larger cartoon of 6 frames: a person is walking along. Others rush past:

You’ll miss out: You won’t make it: You’ll be over looked: You won’t win.
And the walking person says, How wonderful, How delightful, How restful.

My five loaves will be just fine: my two fish, more than enough. All I need to do is turn up and offer them. In cultivating a Spiritual life, we arrive with 5 loaves and two fish, that’s all it takes to feed the 5 thousand. That’s all.

Imagine if we did practice that time, and formally put that time away. We close the door. We sit in the window. We get out of the house and sit in the park or garden. We turn off the Mobile for

10 minutes. What if we did it regularly? We hear a lot about mindfulness, and mindfulness practice. We Christians have been cultivating that for centuries. How did we lose it? When did it fall off the wagon. When we were rushing?

But to be still. To be still. Comes with a blessing: to be still and know. Psalm 45:10.

Over Holy week I came across a spiritual practice I'd not done before. The book said to get a crucifix: a cross with Jesus on it: and sit contemplating it for 20 mins each day. So as weird as it sounds, that is what I did. I want to share this with you because it was pretty odd: I set up my coffee table with the cross, and I thought a candle might be a good and familiar thing from my usual practice: after I'd finished my writing for that day: I sat from 5.30 to 10 to six. And it felt odd. It was hard to be. As the light faded, and the candle light grew more prominent, the figure of Jesus did some pretty weird things. The shadows made some funny shapes. It didn't look like Jesus. My mind wandered. The next day I move the candle to be less distracting. Still felt odd. And the shadows were still there. The next day, something shifted. Nothing dramatic. But what I noticed was that during the day I was hanging out, yearning for, and even longing for that time to stop. Even though the set practice was not quite "me". It was a good thing.

The Christian Spiritual life is a quiet thing. When we stop these practices we barely notice them gone. When we start they can feel a bit odd. But in my humble experience, I've never regretted the time set aside. So you and I may not have been able to make the Church camp: but we can get away some time this week. Even if it is just for a short period of the day. And the five loaves and 2 fish will be more than enough. And we won't fall apart. We won't be like sheep without a shepherd. We will be gathered and changed into more of who we feel we are. More of who we know of God. And will be able to be with those who need us, running along the shoreline to meet us when we return. The eyes of your heart will be enlightened. And you will know the hope to which we are called.

And who wouldn't want to be drawn into that mystery? Who wouldn't want to be nurtured in that way? Who wouldn't be bold enough to try again, and come away. I *'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while'*. Make sure you take that rest this weekend. You won't regret you did.

*"... with the eyes of your heart enlightened may you know the hope to which he has called you'
(based on Ephesians 1:18)*