

Sixteenth Sunday of the Year 2021

Mthr Esther Brazil

“As he landed he saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Like our Lord, I have landed, much to my delight, among a great and welcoming throng; but this story diverges from our gospel reading in that you are certainly not sheep without a shepherd; and, after two weeks here, I feel I have been ministered to far more than I am ministering, at least so far, with much to learn and absorb over the next three or four years.

Here at St Mary Magdalen's we have, in our priests, our wardens, our sacristans, our servers, our musicians and all those many others who minister in this place, riches beyond all imagining. It is a place in which Christian leadership is modelled well.

Leadership is, on its face, about being told what to do; and the classic example is safety instructions, the ceremonial ignoring of which is something I do miss slightly about air travel. When I flew a lot for work, the litany became so familiar I could almost recite it: here is how the seatbelts work; your life vest is under your seat, and includes a light and a whistle; your nearest exit may be behind you; in the event of an emergency, remove high-heeled shoes before exiting the plane. But I remember being surprised the first time I ever flew by one instruction: in the event of oxygen levels on the plane dropping, and masks being released from the ceiling, passengers are to secure their own masks before helping others.

As apt as this sounds in a Covid-secure church with a very different kind of mask, it seems a little worrying. Certainly the Christian life, which is to do with loving God and neighbour, would seem to point towards always helping others first. Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew chapter 20 that “whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant”, including himself.

But the reason behind the oxygen mask rule is simple: if you have access to oxygen, you can help the wriggling five-year-old, or the person beside you who has fainted; but if you are gasping for air yourself, you can hardly love or help your neighbour. In the case of an aeroplane without oxygen, and perhaps in other urgent crises, self-care and preservation must come first.

Contemporary culture can be very confusing on this subject. We get conflicting messages. On the one hand, we're told to pursue "self-care" through the shallow proposition of bubble baths and massages, but then our culture demands that when we're out of the bath, we work ever harder, achieving, producing, earning, apparently so we can then spend more money on products to soothe our exhausted selves. The cycle is difficult to break. It can feel like we are hamsters in a wheel, and the wheel is powering the economy.

Perhaps the most revolutionary response, the most Christ-like, in fact, is to simply stop from time to time. Jesus might love the world infinitely, but he does not run himself into the ground. Rather, he retreats several times in the gospels -- taking time away, resting, eating good food. Sometimes he accepts hospitality, sometimes he chooses to be alone. In Mark 6, which we heard just now, we see Jesus extending this care to the apostles, telling them to come away -- by themselves -- "to a lonely place, and rest a while. For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat."

This sounds all too familiar. The culture that pushes us to achieve and produce is undergirded by a highly poisonous narrative: that our worth as human beings is directly tied to our output. That the busier we are, the better; the more frantic, the more impressive; the more we earn, the more we should be valued.

The Christ who sought out precisely those who were unproductive would, I think, disagree in the strongest of terms with this. In the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10, we hear that he allowed Mary to sit at his feet and listen while Martha cooked and worked around him. Mary is, on the face of it, unproductive; and we enjoy taking sides

in this story; whether for pious Mary or for hardworking, overlooked Martha. But what we might miss in taking sides is the underlying point that he loved them both. For Jesus, and for us as his disciples, productivity is not tied to worth.

The flip side of believing that output equates to virtue, or value, is that rest is somehow sinful, but we know that this is also not true. Jesus models rest and retreat in today's gospel. And modelling good patterns of work and rest is part of good Christian leadership. It is the work of the good shepherds God announces through the prophet Jeremiah, echoed later in Ezekiel, good shepherds to replace the bad. "The days are 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." None of the kings or prophets or priests of the Bible could fulfil this shepherd role perfectly, though David and Moses came close. It is not until Jesus that we see the perfect shepherd.

Mark's gospel is concerned with Jesus' identity as suffering servant as well as man of action -- exorcising, healing, and doing miracles. How extraordinary, then, that in this most fast-paced of gospels, the writer takes time to describe Jesus stopping for food and rest. The fact that precious words are devoted to these accounts should make us sit up and pay attention.

Jesus' resting is important because of what happens when he returns. "You will know them by their fruits", we hear in Matthew 7, where Jesus compares good and bad prophets to trees bearing good or bad fruit. Jesus is the Davidic shepherd promised in Old Testament prophecies; he comes bearing good fruit, bringing peace. In his humanity, he cannot do this without acknowledging his own human need for food and rest. And so as his time of rest ends, "as he landed", writes the author of Mark's gospel, "he saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things."

Where burnout yields not only exhaustion but also cynicism, rest enables us to return to our work, whatever that may be, fully attentive to the work God is calling us to do,

and fully attentive to those who need us. Rest fills our reservoirs so that we can see the face of Christ in everyone we meet.

The concept of sabbath is a bit of a buzzword in Christian conference circles, and no wonder: we are all so very tired. And sabbath is modelled from the very beginning: in Genesis, God does not, after all, work a seven-day week. We work and rest in a cycle necessary for flourishing -- not a cycle of overwork and bubblebaths, but one of work, rest, and renewal. And within all of this, the God of love and peace who “preached peace to us” in the person of Jesus Christ, as we heard in Ephesians, this man who was God on earth is our touchstone and our pattern, the new shepherd to replace the old bad shepherds who could never love us as perfectly as God himself does.

But peace, of course, does not necessarily mean inaction. In a 2018 address to Christian leaders, Bishop Steven wrote: “Our calling is to live in good rhythms of prayer and rest and work and community. But our calling is not to quiet lives. Our calling is to love God’s world and seek transformation and to turn the world upside down as our forebears have done.”

So consider, this week, where you can find moments of rest; times of sabbath; and how those times will feed you and strengthen you to do the work that God is calling you to do.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.