

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 8th Sunday after Trinity

21st July 2024

All Saints' Marseile

The Revd Roxana Tenea Teleman, Assistant Chaplain

“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile.” This invitation beautifully illustrates Jesus’ concern, gentleness, and wisdom. It is particularly striking in the fast-paced Gospel of Mark, where events unfold ‘immediately’ or ‘at once’, and Jesus moves with unrelenting urgency. Could this be THE Gospel for the 21st century?

The urgency of the Gospel is palpable in today’s passage. Jesus’ disciples have just returned from their first ministry tour, their inauguration into apostleship. They have poured themselves into the mission entrusted to them by Jesus and are both exhilarated and exhausted, eager to share their experiences. Yet, Jesus perceives their tiredness and the need for quietness –needs they may not fully acknowledge themselves. They need not just physical rest, but also respite for their hearts and souls.

Reading Mark’s Gospel from beginning to end, one might picture Jesus as a brisk and efficient Messiah, moving swiftly from his hometown synagogue to village to mountaintop to seaside, amidst a whirlwind of healings, parables, and life-changing encounters. This portrayal may reflect our own tendencies towards busyness and our fear of idleness, serving as a justification for our own hectic lifestyles as we attempt to mirror our Lord.

Yet, if we pause and reflect on this morning’s passage, a different image of Jesus emerges - one who recognises his disciples’ exhaustion and responds with gentle compassion. Notice that instead of reacting to their reports of activity by assigning more tasks, Jesus simply says, “Come away to a deserted place all by

yourselves and rest awhile.” How refreshing this invitation must have been to his weary disciples.

Don't we all yearn to hear these words from our Lord? Don't we all long for the invitation to a place where we can rest awhile in the presence of Christ? When we gather around him, we may be tempted to recount all the things we have done, presenting our busyness and our weariness as if they were worthy of praise and reward. We convince ourselves that our efforts prove our faithfulness as disciples.

Yet, our busyness and weariness reveal the illusion that we control our lives and can reconcile ourselves with God through our actions. God sees beyond these illusions, looking into our hearts to discern our true needs and desires - the deep hungers for space, reflection, solitude, and rest that our work-focused culture often obscures. He invites us to lie down in green pastures, leads us beside still waters, and restores our souls. He gently calls, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile.”

In that deserted place, in the company of Christ, we can rediscover ourselves, free ourselves from the grips of anxiety and fear, embrace the quiet, and rejuvenate our hearts from our frenzied lives.

Yet, don't we all know that even the best-laid plans can sometimes falter? According to Mark, Jesus' plan to retreat by boat fails when the crowds anticipate his destination and follow on foot. By the time he and his disciples arrive at their hoped-for refuge, the crowds are already there, and the quiet sanctuary they sought remains elusive.

Does Jesus flee or change course? No. As Mark describes, “as he went ashore, Jesus saw the great crowd and had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

To have compassion means to show sympathy, mercy, and loving concern - to suffer alongside others. The original term used in the Gospels is rooted in a word meaning 'guts' and the seat of feelings. That is compassion — a visceral, deep feeling that radiates throughout the body like an adrenaline rush.

John the Dwarf, one of the early Christians known as the Desert Mothers and Fathers, who chose to dwell in the wilderness and spend their life there with Christ, said: “You don't build the house by starting with the roof and working

down. You start with the foundation [which] is our neighbour. The neighbour is where we start.” Everything begins with this vision and hope of putting the neighbour in touch with God in Christ – through our compassion.

For Jesus, compassion is not merely an emotion but an active response. He demonstrated that compassion is fundamental to discipleship; it is both a requirement and an imperative that drives to act for the sake of others.

Yet, only a heart that resists the pull of haste is truly capable of responding with compassion. Those who dedicate their lives to caring for others must first attend to their own well-being.

When Mother Teresa’s letters to her spiritual advisors were published a decade after her death, they revealed the profound inner struggles, despair, doubt, and loneliness she endured despite her dedication to the ‘Lord’s work’. While she lived among the poor and spent her days and nights in service, compassion was far from being straightforward or comfortable. It was forged at great personal cost. This week, as I reflected on today’s Gospel, I wondered whether Mother Teresa had ever been encouraged - or even allowed - to take the time she needed to be refreshed and restored amid the endless desperate petitions, outstretched hands, and unspeakable suffering. I wondered if she ever silenced the voice that gently prompted her to “Come away and rest awhile”, or if she simply postponed such moments of rest until it was too late.

The disciples’ task is twofold: they must attend to everything that cries out for attention and care, while also pausing and paying attention to their own hearts and the manner in which they live their lives. This week’s Gospel reading highlights the essential and ongoing tension between compassion and spiritual self-care. Jesus lived with this tension and taught his disciples how to navigate it as well. Two thousand years later, do we genuinely address this issue with the seriousness it demands?

Is there a lesson for us here? Pope Francis speaks of the need for an ‘ecology of the heart,’ encompassing rest, contemplation - that is, spending quiet time with God - and compassion. So, on one hand, we should not apologise for needing rest and solitude. On the other hand, we must not let our weariness overshadow our compassion. In a world of persistent and urgent needs, like the apostles, we cannot give from an empty well. To be fully present to our families and friends, work, and ourselves, we must respond to the invitation to a quiet space and

time. By entrusting our burdens to Christ, even if only for a little while, we will find restoration.

Hear his voice, calling us into perfect peace - the peace only Christ can give:
"Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

Amen.