

## **Sermon Ordinary Sunday 16 Year B 2021**

I hope that most of you listening in today could look back on your childhoods with a certain kind of nostalgia, as a time of innocence and adventure. Indeed, we expect those things of childhood. We can be resentful when the pressures and obligations of adulthood seemingly rob us of these things. Most of us, it seems, leave childhood to enter a life of stress, hassle and anxiety. Stress, as you would know, is implicated in almost every biological and emotional disorder. Stress plays havoc with our bodies and our minds. If left unchecked, it can unravel the whole of our lives. While we pour millions into alleviating diabetes and heart disease and cancer, stress continues to wreak a terrible toll.

One of the oft-commented effects of the current pandemic is how it has cut our wings. Australians love to travel. We love to go to far and exotic places. We are addicted to 'getting away from it all'. But what is it about our world, our society, and our cities in particular, that means people feel compelled to leave, to 'escape' their ordinary lives? Surely a life that is being well-lived, a balanced life, a life where the different parts and components are properly ordered, isn't the life from which we periodically need to 'escape'? Now it's always nice to have a break, a holiday, a change of scene. But the need to 'escape' the overwhelming burden of stress so many feel, the attempts of so many of our young to obliterate the challenge and stress of life by retreating into a world of technology or drugs or worse, would indicate a society unhinged, unbalanced, that we are not living a good, balanced, ordered life.

Though there are a couple of intervening stories, the gospel placed before us today really picks up from where we left off last week: the disciples sent out in pairs, commanded to take nothing with them, to heal the sick and proclaim the good news of the kingdom. Today, we hear how those first missionaries have obeyed Jesus' directives and now return to him. Without question these first missionary journeys would also have been stressful; they would have met difficult situations; they would have met with opposition (as promised) alongside their successes. They were coming to take some responsibility in the sharing of the good news. But for these ordinary men - now stepping into an up-to-then unimagined life - it would have had it taken it out of them.

Jesus receives his disciples and their efforts have not gone unnoticed. And he calls them away to rest. Jesus' concern for the twelve reveals not only Jesus' simple humanity - that he recognises their limits, the need for stillness, quiet and solitude - but also his care, indeed his love, for his disciples. The 'lonely place' Our Lord invites his disciples to withdraw to is better translated as 'desert place' or even 'wilderness'. It is the stillness and silence and loneliness of the wilderness that we truly turn to and depend on God. In the wilderness there is nothing else. There is nothing to distract or call us away. You will remember it was with the *principle of trust* that saw Jesus send out his disciples on their mission, carrying nothing with them and depending on the goodness of strangers as they went. In the same way, then, it is in the *spirit of trust* that they will be sustained and nourished.

Rather than escaping from duties and responsibilities - all the many things they could be doing and 'should' be doing - it shows Jesus trying to instil in his disciples *sustainable patterns of behaviour*. It is a pattern we see Jesus incorporate into his own life: a pattern of activity and solitude, of work and prayer. What Christ knows to be true for himself, he seeks to impart to his disciples: that a genuine life of faith is a continuous going *into* the presence of God *from* the world, and coming *out* into the world *from* the presence of God. At its most level, this divine order we see reflected in the rhythm of sleep and work. Even this most basic of activities imprinted with the divine order! We cannot work unless we have had our time of rest. But we also know how hard it is to rest well unless we have worked. Jesus here gives the crucial lesson that we cannot effectively engage with the world if we do not equally engage effectively with God. And our engagement with God will only be superficial if we do not bring to him the burdens and cares we encounter in the world.

The key truth being proposed to us is that we cannot live well the life of Christian discipleship relying on a kind of activism or in the strength of our power. This is true at an ordinary everyday kind of level. But its importance is highlighted even more in the environment of growing hostility to the faith we now find ourselves. In that context, the question of *where do we get our strength and sustenance* is more important than ever.

We cannot live the Christian life unless we give ourselves over to time with God. It may well be that the trouble with our lives is that we do not give God opportunity to speak to us because we do not know how to be still and listen; we give God no time to recharge us with spiritual energy and strength, because we allow no time to wait upon him. Simply, we cannot shoulder life's burdens, and go out to address all those who need love, care and attention if we try and do it through our own strength. We can only do God's work in his strength. And we can only receive that strength if we seek it in quietness.

So basic is this to human health, to the ordering of good society, to the right balance of the human psyche, that this rest is ordered by divine command in the fourth commandment: *remember the Sabbath and to keep it holy*. Now this doesn't say all there is to be said about rest and being attentive to the things of God, but it encapsulates the principle: *that it is not sustainable to be lost in frenetic work, activity and busyness*. The good life is also a life which attends to God in silence, prayer and stillness. We do this, I hope, by carefully observing a weekly Sabbath, but also a daily Sabbath - time set aside *each* day to place our hearts and lives and concerns before God. For all its challenges and frustrations, COVID gives us opportunity to rethink this for ourselves. And for those of you more advanced in years, *this is your Sabbath, a graced period* of rest and stillness before God. There is so much anxiety and uncertainty in our culture about how we might better appreciate old age. The church here has a tremendously positive perspective to offer: this Sabbath period of our lives as a time of quietness and reflection, of waiting on God.

For many in our world, and perhaps some of us, we can feel lost in anxiety and busyness. Our first innocence swapped for stress and anxiety. For some, rather than our work and activity being a source of life, we can come to resent it, even the work we attempt to do for God. Or we look to our busyness and activity to prove our worth. There are many who still wander like sheep without a shepherd, many who still need be fed and nurtured, to have pity shown them. But for us to meet those needs, first we need to accept the invitation and the lesson of our Lord, *to come away with him, to a lonely place and rest awhile*. Amen.