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Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

³⁰ The apostles gathered around Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹ He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. ³² And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. ³³ Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. ³⁴ As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things.

⁵³ When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. ⁵⁴ When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him ⁵⁵ and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶ And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.

Sheep in need of teaching

Today's Gospel reading is a strange cobbling together of two passages that are Mark's summary bits around the main happenings. It starts with the 12 returning from having been sent out to proclaim the Kingdom, trying to get to a deserted region for some rest but in the missing verses (35-52) between the two sections is described the feeding of the 5000 and the account of Jesus walking on the water to the boat as they went back from the deserted region mentioned. The second section of today's reading is about his healing ministry all over the region.

Despite this there are several aspects of this reading which can apply to our lives as followers of Jesus today.

The first verse is about the return of the disciples from their first mission on their own. They were sent out by Jesus and so they report back to him. They

know they are accountable to him in what they did and what they said as he commissioned them, he sent them out for this mission of proclaiming the Kingdom of God. This sort of accountability to those who commission us is still important today though it is not always practiced in our society. It is why we as vicars are accountable to our Bishop in Anglican Church order as our Bishop commissioned us to minister in this church, in our license and our service of institution.

Jesus then calls them to retreat to a deserted place to rest. They have just been involved in intensive ministry so getting time to recuperate is important. But this is not just about rest. Mark says that they were surrounded by people still – many were coming and going – and that they didn't even have time to eat – they had no leisure even to eat.

They obviously needed to get away from people for a while but the detail about having leisure to eat is particularly significant. Eating was not just about getting fuel to replenish your strength in that society. Eating a meal was about sitting down and reclining to take time to talk and have fellowship around the table. It was about having conversation and reconnecting - like a family sharing a meal at the end of a day when you all can catch up with one another. Jesus recognized that the disciples needed to catch up with each other and spend time with him too. Likewise the people of God today need to regularly keep on gathering around the table to be reconnected with each other and with Jesus, to re-establish the bonds of kinship, our Christian brother-and-sister-hood. Having that sort of leisurely meal and conversation with one another is the beginning of rest. The Jewish Sabbath day of rest begins with the Sabbath meal on the Friday evening after sundown – the way they count a day from sundown to sundown.

Also the phrase 'by yourselves' is used throughout the gospels for when Jesus draws his disciples apart to have them listen to his teaching. He was wanting to give them more as they rested. Even though they had enjoyed a successful mission they still had much to learn.

So even these first 2 verses say something about Jesus' priorities for us – to be accountable to those who commission us for service, to not always be working but rather to take time to rest and recuperate, to spend times of leisurely fellowship with our Christian sisters and brothers (a slow meal is ideal for this) in conversation and listening to each other and what Jesus may be saying among us, and to be taking the time to learn more and more from Jesus even when we have just been proficiently doing what he has sent us to do. These are what Jesus wanted even for his closest disciples - it is his care for them – it is what we would surely seek if we are to be his disciples today too.

So then they got in the boat to travel further along the coast of Galilee to a place where there would normally not be many people. However as they travelled in their boat people saw them from the shore and both hurried ahead of them and gathered more from nearby villages so that by the time they came back to the shore further away from local villages there were actually about 5000 men plus women and children already there. That's how many they had to feed later and we know the place was too far from the local towns for them to easily go and buy food. As the population of the galilee region was estimated to be several 100 thousand according to historical sources of the time we know that for thousands of people to gather quickly would not have been unlikely. So the only time the disciples got to be alone with Jesus was the journey in the boat.

What was Jesus reaction to seeing all these people waiting for them? Not annoyance that his plans for rest, refreshment, conversation and teaching would not come about but rather compassion. The word here has the sense of gut-wrenching feeling. Why did he feel like this? Because he saw that they were like sheep without a shepherd. Throughout the Old Testament the people of God were described as this whenever they were without good leadership.

In NZ we know a little bit about sheep. They don't see very well, they hear a bit better but easily get scared and scattered by sharp noises and they don't think much about where they are going, tending to just keep their heads down and

wander from one tuft of grass to the next. They also like to stick together, or follow the one in front when they are moving. The people of God are described as sheep as they have similar characteristics. People without leadership will react to what they hear without really seeing where they are going, and just like to stick to staying with the ones around them. We too need the direction a God appointed leader will give us. God described his people as sheep and provided the leadership, the shepherding, they needed to be able to move with the feeling of safety they needed in staying together but also in the right direction to get the sustenance they needed for life. We can all relate to the 23rd psalm.

So what did Jesus' shepherd heart for the people provide? What did his compassion lead him to do for them? Teach them many things! We often think that compassion is about seeing someone suffering and should lead to meeting people's physical needs. But Jesus had compassion on them as he saw that most of all they were lacking leadership and direction and so he taught them. Mark sets out Jesus as the shepherd who feeds his people with true teaching; from his supply there is more than enough to feed all their needs. The people cannot live on bread alone, but need every word that comes from the mouth of God, brought to them in the teaching of Jesus. You cannot separate 'pastoral' care from teaching the word.

And we know the sort of teaching that he provided from the many gospel accounts we have of it. Teaching that the Kingdom of God had come in himself, demonstrated in his healing and freeing people from demons, teaching that included instructions for living life in God's Kingdom, bearing the good fruit of living under God's reign – such things as loving your neighbor and your enemy, and praying for those who persecute you, unlimited forgiveness and not judging other's faults, not worrying about your needs or accumulating wealth but being generous and just asking God for what you need, that what is inside is important - lustful, or murderous thoughts, evil intentions, stealing, lying, slandering – these defile people, while we are not to do good just to be seen by others but be humble, that we are to put God and obeying his ways first even if it involves self-sacrifice, that not everyone wants to follow Jesus and live

according to his ways but that this has eternal consequences. All this and much more we know is the sort of teaching Jesus gave – not head knowledge but instructions about living in God’s Kingdom, living the full and fruitful life God has for those who would humbly come to him. This is what Jesus knew people really needed as they swarmed to him. This is what Jesus would bring to us, his sheep now too, as our shepherd.

After the feeding of the multitude and then the incident where Jesus walks on the water towards the boat in the wind, they reach the shore at Gennesaret. This was a flattish more fertile area between Tiberius and Capernaum and much more populated. Once again people recognize him and rush to him. Here it is not too far for them to bring those who were sick on the bedmats to be healed. They were passing the word about where he was and bringing the sick to the marketplaces – the natural public gathering places in each area he went to.

Mark mentions another significant detail here – that people were begging to touch even the fringe of his cloak to be healed. The fringe would have been the tassels of a traditional Jewish garment. This shows that Jesus was a Torah observant Jew of his day. The tassels were a symbol of the commandments and of obedience to them. Obeying God and his word was important to Jesus even as he was teaching people how to do that too. People were reaching out to touch the word of God – the new word of God in Jesus – who teaches, feeds, heals.

Mark has given us insights today about how Jesus came proclaiming God’s Kingdom, teaching and demonstrating what life in God’s Kingdom involves. Jesus is full of compassion and care – for everyone as all need that direction and feeding like sheep who need a shepherd, and for those who hear and respond to his call and follow him as his disciples. We have the choice as to whether we reach out and touch him, whether we take the time together to listen to him and decide to follow his ways, to follow his lead as our shepherd. Let us pray.

