

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. 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. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. 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. (Mk 6:30-34)

Today's Gospel reading seems, at first, to be an odd one to have at the beginning of the school year. Surely, you might argue, it would be better at the *end* of a tiring year, when what we all need is some rest. And yes, you're right. They do apply, particularly then, but they are also something that apply to us as we gather at the start of the academic year, because it's now that we can hear them and apply them throughout the year because they teach us the importance of rest *throughout our lives*.

To put the reading into context, Jesus has started his work. He's gathered his posse together; performed a few miracles, been more or less hounded out of his home town and has sent his team out in pairs to begin the work that they have been called to do. After a while these disciples return, bring news of the results they have had. It has been an insanely busy and draining period of teaching, and exorcising, and healing. Jesus and his disciples have given of themselves over and over again, day after day and, on their joyous return he tells them, "come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

It's an important sentence and easily overlooked. In fact, there are four different parts to it which mean something on their own, and amplify each other.

Come away.
To a deserted place.
All by yourselves.
And rest a while.

How do these words and their inherent command to rest apply to us?

Over and over again, Jesus instructs us to go against the way the world thinks. Christians need to buck the trends of the world, and go against the grain and when we do that it looks "crazy," but it looks so much more like the life of Jesus. As St. Paul reminds us in his first letter to the Corinthians "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

A huge part of such craziness is doing stuff. Doing justice. Doing acts of love. Doing forgiveness. But...if we're going to buck the trends of the world, one such trend is bucking the idol of busyness. We need to rest.

The world is a crazy hectic place. Not so many years ago, if two people were having a conversation and a third came up to them and interrupted, they'd be fairly annoyed. Then the plucky Scot Alexander Graham Bell came along and invented the telephone. All of a sudden, we had a device that actually made interruption polite. The phone rings, and most people will break off from their conversation or whatever else they are doing to answer it. Nowadays with texting, tweeting and other forms of blogging it's even worse. With all the miracles of modern technology we are only a mobile's *ding* away from whoever might think they need something. Or everyone's *dings* of need.

And, we make busyness a badge of honor. “How’s it going?” “Pretty crazy! Pretty busy!” we answer. And that answer has an implicit message: I’m worthwhile because I’m busy.

That’s something to stop before we start at the beginning of the year. We have worth, but it doesn’t come from our seventy hour work-weeks, or our month straight with no day off. Those things aren’t a badge of honor. They are marks of an imbalanced life, an imbalanced ministry, and an arid spiritual life.

So we turn to the four parts of Jesus’ words today.

Come away. Notice that it’s not simply “going away,” but it’s “coming away” *with* Jesus. Jesus isn’t an angry boss who works us from sunrise to sunset. Schools can be that boss also. They can suck the life out of anyone—lay and ordained—until we break under the weight of burnout. But, Jesus is the one whose yoke is easy. His burden is light. And he is the embodiment of refreshment in the Presence of God. We need to get away from the grind of ministry, no matter our office whether it be pastor, co-ordinator, instructor or assistant. We need to come away with Jesus.

To a deserted place. Group retreats can be great. But, we also need time alone. We need to go to where there is nothing. A place deserted. Perhaps desolate. I’d even add, deserted by wifi and 4G, email and voicemail. Deserted by Facebook and Twitter. We need to recharge our batteries, with Jesus, and no one else. We have a spiritual needs to get out of the trenches and be alone.

All by yourselves. Yes, in case you missed it in the last phrase/ paragraph—Jesus really means it. Psychologists are agreed that solitude allows the brain time to unwind, improves concentration, provides time for deeper thought and can enhance your relationships with others. Indeed, ten or fifteen minutes in solitude a day has been shown to have measurable psychological benefits.

And rest a while. This isn’t laziness. It’s not a perpetual state. It’s temporary. It’s for a *while*. But, for that while, it’s about rest. We cannot just minister to others day by day, month by month. If we don’t rest, we won’t be able to take care of others. If we don’t slow down, we will be of no use to anyone, especially God.

It’s important at the beginning of the year to build into our routines times to follow Jesus. To a deserted place, all by yourself. And rest. For an hour or two. For a day here and there. Build in as much time as you need. Put down the iPhone. Don’t update your status. Set the away message on your voicemail and email, and don’t even think of checking on it.

For in so doing you’ll be embracing the spiritual practice of rest. And, while the rest of the world may think you’re a little crazy...you’ll be crazy in all the right ways. The same craziness that led the disciples to follow Jesus and to work with him and through him, to the glory of the Gospel. The same craziness that inspires you all to follow the calling God has given to each and every one of you to spend time, instructing children in the message of salvation.