



OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B

Homily

[*Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 23; Ephesians 2:13-18; Mark 6:30-34*]

At this time of year, in the middle of summer, thoughts of many people are turning toward getting away and taking a break. I expect the desire for change and rest is felt most acutely this year, given the pervasive exhaustion following months of pandemic lockdown and restrictions. Worn out, people are looking for opportunities to be refreshed and restored.

“Getting away” takes many forms. It could be a road trip, a camping excursion, time away to visit family, or simply getting lost in a good book while remaining at home. These are all good; rest is necessary for both mind and body. In the Gospel passage for today, Jesus invites each of us to a rest that is deeper and more restorative than anything we can create for ourselves. His is an invitation to step away from the routine and rest in him.

In the text we have from St. Matthew, the apostles are exhausted from prolonged and intense missionary activity. More demanding work awaits them, so Jesus instructs them first to take a break. “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while,” he says. As we look closely at this instruction, we shall see that it is given not only to those first apostles but also to us as the way to attain the true rest we most deeply need.

The reference by Jesus to a “deserted place” evokes the image of the desert, which throughout Scripture is often the place of solitude, where people withdraw from the worries and busyness of everyday life to be in close intimacy with God. Right away we see that Jesus is not just getting his disciples to take a break from activity. He wants them to spend time alone with him so as to be refreshed and restored – fully – by being in his presence, sharing with him everything on their minds and in their hearts, and finding renewed strength from their communion of love with him.

This raises an immediate question. In the concrete circumstances of my life, how can I get away to a “deserted place” to rest with the Lord? This does not necessarily mean traveling somewhere. What it does mean is deliberately carving out “space” in the day, setting aside some time, even only a few minutes if that is all that is possible, which is dedicated solely for the Lord and concentrating on the wonder of his presence in my life.

Within that time, that “deserted place”, what do I do? In answer to that question, common vacation activities can serve as helpful analogies.

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Some people like to spend time at a lake or in the mountains to contemplate the beauty of nature. The deepest rest begins to take hold in our lives when we contemplate the wonder of Jesus himself. The Gospel passage goes on to present Jesus as the shepherd foretold by Jeremiah, sent by God to feed and nourish God's people with not only bread but also instruction. In the deserted place we create for ourselves, we are restored as we contemplate the truth that Jesus is our good shepherd, that he truly loves us and is close to us, that there is nothing he cannot take care of, and that we are safe in his care and lack nothing, as the Psalmist affirms.

Many look forward to relaxation with a good book. In our "deserted place", do we take time with the best of all books, the Bible? Quiet contemplation of the Word of God brings a refreshment that leaves one wondering why the Bible is not at the top of every one of the many summer reading lists that abound this time of year. The second reading from *Ephesians* is a good example of why this is so.

In the passage we have from that letter, St. Paul speaks of Jesus as the one who, by his death and resurrection, has broken down the walls of hostility that peoples erect between themselves. There is little more exhausting and discouraging than the bitterness that separates people. The pain of hostile separation is especially excruciating when it occurs in the family. The Word of God assures us that such separation does not have to be the last word. Reconciliation is possible, peace can be restored, if we but turn to Jesus, contemplate his love, and accept him as our peace. In Jesus, the complete exhaustion born of painful separation yields to the wholesome rest arising from healed relationships.

So, how shall we get the best rest this summer? From our sacred texts today, we learn that it is not a matter of getting away somewhere or doing something different. It is a matter not of "going away" but of "being with"; being with Jesus, contemplating the beauty of his love, and savouring his every Word of truth and hope. This brings us the deepest rest, and is available not just at vacation time but every day of the year. May that rest be ours now, as in this Eucharist we are fed, nourished, and restored by the gift of communion with Jesus, the Son of God.

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