

You'll remember that in the gospel reading last Sunday, Jesus sent his apostles out in pairs to cast out devils and cure the sick. In today's gospel they come back to Jesus and tell him all that had happened. I imagine that there was a lot to tell, as they recounted the many people they met and the lives that were transformed. They probably also had stories of some people resisting their actions. No doubt they have come back both excited and exhausted. Jesus listens to them and tells them that they need to go away for a while to a quiet place to rest.

Already we have seen in the gospel that Jesus himself goes away from time to time to be alone. These are moments of prayer for him. In the Bible, when people go away to a lonely place, it is usually a place where God speaks to them. I think that is what Jesus wanted for the apostles. As they remembered what had happened when they visited various towns and villages, they would have learnt that what they were doing was God's work. They would have learnt that this very human work of meeting people, anointing them with oil and curing them was an encounter with God. It wasn't simply a matter of doing lots and lots of things, so that at the end of the day they could count up the number of people they had met. Rather, they would have learnt that the way they met these people and spoke to them was more important than the number of people they met. So, going to the lonely place would give them the opportunity to learn that the mission Jesus had sent them on was not just a task to be done but was about showing kindness and love to people who were alone and isolated because of their sickness or situation in life.

Well, that's how things should have worked out, but we know that when they got to the shore, they saw that the people had worked out where they were going and had rushed there on foot. The rest in a lonely place, which the apostles were looking forward to, was now about to be disrupted. You could imagine that they might have wanted to turn the boat around and sail to a different location. But Jesus responds differently. He steps ashore. He recognises that the people were desperate for something that clearly their leaders were not giving them. Jesus sees them as sheep without a shepherd. We're told that he felt pity for them. But that seems to be a weak translation for what is a much stronger word in its original language. The original word means that he was moved to the very core of his being. We might say that his heart was churning as he saw them, or that he felt sick as he saw them. He saw before him people who had the potential to live good lives, but who didn't have the support they needed to become the

people they could be. These were people who were lost, like sheep without a shepherd. Jesus was about to show himself as their shepherd. The next scene is his feeding them with the loaves and fish. But we have to wait for that until next week.

So, what became of the desire Jesus had to take the apostles away to a lonely place so that they might rest a while? I think the lessons they might have learnt with Jesus in that lonely place were likely learnt even more strongly in this incident with Jesus and the crowds. They would have learnt the meaning of compassion. This would affect the way, in the future, they look at other people and interact with them. They might have recognised that the truly human interactions they had with people were places of encounter with God. What Jesus was asking of them was that they be like shepherds looking after the sheep – looking out for the weakest and the most vulnerable. On the seashore, the apostles would see that Jesus was the true shepherd, showing them what true leadership entailed. I am sure that the next time he sent them out, they would have been better equipped to act the way they had seen him acting.

While the apostles are the focus of this scene, it also tells us something about how to live the Christian life – how to be true disciples of Jesus. There are some lessons we can take from it. One lesson is that it is important that we have time in our busy lives to be alone with God and to listen to what God might be saying to us through the encounters we have had with others, or the situations we have faced, or the challenges and difficulties we may have experienced. I think that is what Jesus means by resting for a while. God can speak to us, as it were, through these human encounters.

Another lesson is to realise that we are in our own way, called to be like the good shepherd who felt compassion for the people he saw. This means that in all our human interactions we recognise that the people we meet are loved by God. It also means that we can be the channel through which God works in their lives.

As we continue to ponder this gospel scene, may we keep our eye on Jesus and imitate him.