

18th Sunday of the Year A

He withdrew to a lonely place

In today's Gospel we hear of Jesus' reaction to the news of John the Baptist's death. John was Jesus' cousin. They had greeted each other while still in their mothers' wombs. John was truly a prophet, an upright man who lived an ascetic lifestyle and spoke the word of God to the people. He had been beheaded by the evil King Herod whom he denounced for marrying his brother's wife.

Hearing the news of John's death, we read that Jesus withdrew by boat to a lonely place where he and his disciples could be by themselves. Clearly, he needed time to grieve John's death, but also to take stock of his own situation. John's brutal death was surely a sign of what awaited him. In his humanity, he must have been afraid, fearful for his own safety. Perhaps he was even tempted to give up on his mission, to go back to Galilee where he would be safe.

Whatever, he withdrew to a quiet place to grieve and take stock of what was happening – to pray, to think. He had to step aside for a while to regain some inner balance and perspective.

In our lives also, we need to withdraw from the district occasionally – we need to step away from the bustle of daily activities to find some time for ourselves – time to relax, to think, to pray. That is very important.

But, of course, we cannot withdraw forever. At a certain moment, we all must step back into the fray of life with all its demands.

And what brings us back is the cry of people. This was the case with Jesus: 'When he stepped ashore, he saw a large crowd, and he was moved with compassion for them and he healed their sick.' And then when evening came, he fed them. He could not abandon his people.

And it is the same with us – it is always the cry of others, the needs of others, that draws us out of ourselves and back into mission. It is the cry of others that saves us from getting locked into the mire of our own difficulties. It prevents us from drowning in a sea of self-pity.

It is others, less fortunate than we are, who call us out from this and back into mission, to a certain self-forgetfulness, and in this we find happiness, and peace once more.

In all of this, the Sunday Eucharist is very important. It is a special hour each week when we can step aside from the bustle of life to quietly reflect and pray, and for our souls to be nourished by Jesus through the Scriptures that are proclaimed and the bread of life that we receive in Holy Communion. Hopefully, as we leave this Eucharistic celebration today, we will feel more refreshed and ready, once again to respond to the needs of those who need our help, whose cries pierce our hearts.

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