

Subject: 16 Sunday of Year B

16th Sunday Year B

(Three sermons)

MASTER THE FINE ART OF RETREAT

Mk. 6:30-34

I can just imagine how happy and excited the Apostles were on returning from their first preaching engagement. For some time now they had been the recipients of Jesus' teaching. He had sent them out two by two with instructions to cast out devils, heal and preach repentance. The outcome was a great success. They were highly excited about the impressive things they could do in the name of Jesus. They were eager to know how the other groups had got on and to relate to Jesus all that had happened. Jesus understood their need for sharing. Now they needed rest. So, He suggested that they should go away to a lonely place where they would not be disturbed by crowds.

Matthew tells us that there was another reason for their brief withdrawal. John the Baptist had just been martyred and they all needed this time to grieve. Jesus had a great love and respect for his cousin John and some of His Apostles had once been John's disciples. They also needed to ponder what the death of John might mean to their cause.

The crowd had other ideas. They could not get enough of Jesus and when they found out where He was heading, they intruded on His privacy. Although their plans were frustrated the story clearly illustrates the need to take time off from the constant routine of duties. A time of retreat is necessary for we can't do anything for others until first we have done something for ourselves. Jesus and His Apostles had given themselves without reserve. They were now faced with the necessity of renewing their own strength. What good would it do to keep on giving when they had little or nothing left to give? In our emphasis on practical religion, giving, serving and doing are all well and good, but we must take into account that it is worthless to keep on writing cheques unless we take the time to put some money in the bank. It accomplishes nothing to keep on drawing up the bucket after the well has run dry. Before we start giving ourselves to the world, we should, first of all, see to it that we have a self that is worth giving. Otherwise our efforts are futile and frantic and our message uncertain and unconvincing. Jesus had mastered the fine art of retreat. He got away from the world in order to return to the world, renewed, revitalised and ready to serve.

Right from the beginning this was the advice God gave humankind. Work six days and rest one day He told our first parents. We all know the body's demands for sleep and how sluggish we feel after a restless night. I think the Italians and Spaniards have got it right in religiously observing each day between 2 and 4 p.m. a siesta. That suits me fine for I am a morning bird. I find a little nap in the afternoon sets me up for work and prayer for the rest of the day. If I don't get it, I feel sluggish, especially when I have to get up at 6 each morning.

Leisure time is especially important for those who give advice and direction to others. The counsellor's mind needs time to put things together, build up a reserve of knowledge and give from his or her fullness, like a reservoir. Racing from one case to the next is like drawing water for an empty well. How right St. Benedict was when he guided his monks to obey the threefold rhythm of prayer, work and recreation.

This is a point worth making. It can be very beneficial in some marriages for an occasional dinner out for husband and wife. The result can be a continual bonding of their union. Of

course, there is food at home and they could save some money by not going out, but there are greater things to save than money. Not all marriages need this, but some do.

How urgently we need to learn this lesson of taking a break. There comes a time when we must do something besides trying a little harder. Some problems cannot be handled and some challenges cannot be met by mere energetic enthusiasm. We need insight, wisdom, power and spiritual reserves. Jesus had all of these, and much of His secret is written in the words of today's Gospel, "You must come away to some lonely place all by yourselves and rest for a while."

Lord Jesus, You saw people more clearly, loved them more dearly and served them more effectively, because You had mastered the fine art of retreat. May we learn this from You.

DRAT! I HAVE TO CHANGE MY PLANS

Mk. 6: 30-34

Jesus planned a short break for Himself and His Apostles. They needed it. There seemed to be no rest from the people. "There were so many coming and going that the Apostles had no time even to eat." No one can endure that pressure for very long so Jesus decided that there were going to have a rest.

Doubtless there was some planning and eager anticipation. Provisions would have been bought and loaded onto the boat. Early in the morning they boarded it and headed across the Sea of Galilee. As they rowed the silence was broken only by the sound of the oars in the water and the occasional cry of a water fowl. Now they were going to have an opportunity for peace and relaxation.

But it was not to work out as they had planned. As they drew near to land, they saw a crowd waiting for them. Their cherished plans were dashed and instead of the expected solitude they were confronted with needy people reaching out for help.

The same kind of thing has happened to all of us. Life seems to take delight in disrupting our plans. We make provision for a secure future but then we lose our job. Some people made plans to have a happy marriage and a good home, but their spouse had other plans and walked out on them. How do we react when our plans do not work out? In today's Gospel Jesus helps us to answer that question.

We so easily forget that disappointment and disruption are all part and parcel of life. Not even Jesus was allowed to live His life as He wanted. He met with obstacles and frustrations through His ministry but He was never resentful. On the occasion of the wedding feast at Cana it was not His intention to work any miracles but, at His mother's request, He changed water into wine to save the embarrassment of the host. Things did not always happen as He wished! Is it, therefore, reasonable for us to expect that it will be any different for us?

Another thing Jesus could have done when His plans did not work out was to resign Himself passively to the inevitable. He could have gritted His teeth and gone out to meet that crowd, determined that He would somehow make it through the day. Such an attitude would have been understandable and certainly better than showing resentment. Surely there must be a better option than to grit our teeth and ride it out?

In today's Gospel Jesus shows us the positive way to act when our plans do not work out. We can turn adversity to our advantage. Mark tells us that He pitied the people and "began to teach them at length" transforming that seashore into a classroom: people left

Him that day with a few seeds of eternal truth planted in their minds. You can trace that same spirit throughout His ministry. When the Pharisees questioned His morals because He mingled with sinners, He did not merely endure it but took their harsh criticism and used it as a backdrop to tell His best story relating to the forgiveness of His Father, the story of the Prodigal Son. Even when they nailed Him to a cross, He took that ugly instrument of death and made it the most powerful influence for good that the world has ever known.

What about us? Which of the three options do we choose when our plans do not work out? We can be resentful, or stoically accepting and enduring, or we can do something positive. We have all had the experience of someone in need making demands on our time. Do we resent the intrusion, give our time reluctantly or use this interruption as an opportunity to show our love and concern?

Lord Jesus, we cannot always decide what life does to us, but we can decide how we respond to life. May You give us the courage to make the right choice.

HOW JESUS SAW PEOPLE

Mk. 6:30-34

During His public ministry Jesus was the number one celebrity in all of Israel. If word got out that He was in a particular place, a crowd would soon gather. When He left that place and went to another, a different crowd would soon gather. People were drawn to Him as steel shavings to a magnet. They wanted to see Him for many reasons. Some were there to spy on Him. They regarded Him as dangerous to their religion, and were looking for a way to discredit Him. Others partly believed, and greatly hoped that He was the promised Messiah.

Others were looking for a cure to their sickness. Whatever the attraction, people wanted to be where He was.

Popularity may be an appealing thought, but it does have its downside. The Apostles wanted to spend some quiet with the Lord, and so often they couldn't get it. Jesus, too, I am sure would have liked to have given His Apostles more attention, but the crowd made this hard. Although the Gospel of today doesn't say that the crowd irritated the Apostles, we know there were times when they tried to give Jesus some space, some peace and quiet. A couple of times they became impatient with people. There was the Canaanite woman who made herself a nuisance. She was desperate to have her daughter healed, and the Apostles had to tell Jesus to let her have her way or she would wear them out. Then there were those mothers who brought their children to Jesus and the Apostles asked them not to disturb Jesus.

In today's story we see how Jesus viewed the crowd. "He took pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd." That was Jesus' reaction to the crowd that shattered the peace and quiet He planned. They were vulnerable, lost, confused and in need of help. If we could look at people through the eyes of Jesus, what do you think we would see?

I think we would see some invisible burdens. Everyone carries burdens to varying degrees. Most people do not carry their heartaches for all to see. They bear them quietly and bravely, but they are there nonetheless. That couple in the car ahead may be a father and mother, who are worried about the financial affairs of their son. The woman in the supermarket may be concerned about her health, anxiously awaiting her doctor's report. That elderly man crossing the road may have recently lost his wife, who was a constant companion to him for over fifty years. Someone once wisely said, "Be kind to each person you meet, because everyone is having a hard time."

I found a poem written by someone who had the eyes of Christ.

“Pray don’t find fault with the man who limps and stumbles along the road,

Unless you have worn the shoes he wears or struggled beneath his load.

There may be tacks in his shoes that hurt, though hidden away from view,

And the load he bears placed on your back might cause you to stumble, too.”

Looking at people through the eyes of Jesus, would make us see some invisible burdens.

We would also see some extenuating circumstances. The critics of Jesus often thought He was too lenient in His attitude towards sinners. He came to the defence of a woman who was caught committing adultery. How could He do that, when the law of Moses clearly states that she should be stoned? He showed compassion to a prostitute, who washed His feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. They wondered why He would allow a woman like her to touch Him. He said to a dying thief, “Today, you will be with Me in paradise.” What right did a crucified criminal have to a place in paradise? The difference between Him and His critics was a matter of insight. He knew all the facts and the reasons about these people’s behaviour, whereas they didn’t. If we looked at people through the eyes of Jesus, we would see extenuating circumstances.

Finally, Jesus could see unrealised possibilities in people. He looked at the Pharisee Nicodemus, and He saw in him the possibility of his being born from above. He looked at a rugged fisherman, and saw in him the making of a spiritual rock, the foundation stone of His Church. He looked at the much-married woman of Samaria, and saw her as a witness for His cause.

Someone has said, “Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.” I think Our Lord would heartily agree with that. He saw a large crowd, and He pitied them. If we would look at people through His eyes, beyond all their burdens and failures, we would see unrealised possibilities.

Lord Jesus, this Gospel teaches us that You thoroughly know each one of us. May we trust our lives to You as You lead us to our home in heaven.