

To be honest I'm not sure I'd be either so gracious or compassionate if my down time was hijacked!

What's been going on?

Both Jesus and the disciples are worn out. The twelve have just returned from an exhausting mission trip and are going through a debrief whilst Jesus himself is coming to terms with the murder of his cousin, John the Baptist. They long for some peace and quiet but with all that's going on around them they've no time even to eat.

Perhaps you've had times like that; a quick sandwich sat in the car or bolting down fast food snatched before you went on to the next thing. Jesus recognises the need for rest.

And now, right now, I want to stop for a moment before we delve any further into this passage. I don't know what you've come from this morning or even this week but I'm suggesting now something we're not very good at in church. Today's set Psalm is Psalm 23, the Lord is my Shepherd, you're very familiar with it. It contains words of great comfort; but this morning listen to a Japanese version and then, before we continue exploring the gospel reading together, a few moments of quiet.

Psalm 23 – Japanese Version

The Lord is my pace setter, I will not rush.

He makes me stop for quiet intervals.

He provides me with images of stillness which restore my serenity.

He leads me in ways of efficiency through calmness of mind

And his guidance is peace.

Even though I have a great many things to accomplish each day,

I will not fret, for his presence is here.

He prepares refreshment and renewal in the midst of my activities.

By anointing my head with his oils of tranquillity.

His timelessness, His all importance will keep me in balance.

My cup of joyful energy overflows.

Truly, harmony and effectiveness shall be the fruit of my hours,

For I shall walk in the pace of my Lord

And dwell in His house for ever.

Jesus and the disciples were going to have to wait for their time of quiet. With plans gone awry rest is put aside. The crowds had gone ahead and Jesus, seeing them, had compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. The political and religious leadership had failed them.

Sheep without a shepherd. In the OT, in Numbers, we have Moses' prayer to God that he will appoint a successor to Moses so that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep without a shepherd, and Joshua is appointed. In Hebrew 'Yeshua', Jesus' name. Back in Ezekiel 34 the word of the Lord comes to him. Without a shepherd the sheep are weakened, scattered, vulnerable. Mark, in his gospel, identifies Jesus as the divine shepherd.

Compassion; not just a feeling but a doing. A feeling in your guts, a stomach churning. The feeling that sends you into action for others. The feeling that won't go away until you've responded. There is no true compassion unless it's known by others!

Having compassion Jesus began to teach them many things.

Perhaps some of you have watched episodes of the TV serial 'Our Yorkshire Farm'. Or maybe you've read or heard about James Rebanks book, 'A Shepherd's Life'.

A shepherd's life is a hard life; out in all weathers, never a day off. But the thing that comes across to me as making the job even harder is the fact that the sheep appear to have minds of their own and their thoughts don't always correspond with the shepherd's.

They end up in dangerous places from which they've to be rescued. Some are want to wander off on their own. They resist both dogs and shepherd until they've no option but to fall into line. The worse the weather, the worse the days, the more the sheep need their shepherd. The people were like sheep.

Jesus began to teach them many things. Was this what the crowds were expecting or hoping for?

Unless you've either a Bible open in front of you or a very good memory you may not realise the verses that have been missed from today's reading. We heard verses 30-34, skipped a bit and read 53-end. The verses that have been missed are the feeding of the 5,000 and Jesus walking on the water. Two miracles. Why have they been omitted from today's lectionary reading?

Both suffering and sacrifice are an over-arching theme in Mark's gospel and perhaps today this is where our focus needs to be. I'm sure we all long to see miracles that transport us to the mountain peaks of our faith but are we so keen to get stuck into the nitty gritty? The Beatitudes recited earlier in this service - forgiveness, loving the unlovely, working towards peace . . .?

There's no question, healing for the sick is both wanted and needed. The hungry of course need to be fed and here on the Island we are blessed to have an efficient and effective Foodbank. But there are also less tangible needs. As Jesus saw the crowd he knew that the food for which they were truly hungry was the very word of God;

What is it we need to flourish and be the people God has called us to be? What is it we need as individuals, households and a community to flourish as God's children put here for a purpose?

Jesus opens up to the crowd the possibility of life in God's kingdom. He opens to us here at Christ Church the same possibility. Seeing us, having compassion on us, what would be his next move? Would the first thing he did be to teach us many things? I don't have the answer but something to think about as tomorrow we move into a so called normal, restrictions laid aside, a move which you may, or may not, be looking forward to.

One of the participants at Forest Church, some little while ago, wrote a song. For the refrain she used these words

Dreams become prayers.

Prayers become hopes.

Hopes become actions.

Actions change the world.

In the final verses of our reading Jesus heals the sick. He subverts the economy of the world. The space is occupied by the least, the vulnerable.

The people were like sheep without a shepherd. They did have a shepherd but they were living as if without one, without direction or purpose. If we truly believe God is the answer, what is it we should be doing about it? As Jesus turns his face towards us and has compassion, as we turn our face to our community may we have that feeling that just won't go away until it finds its expression in action. Amen.