

Revd Michael Burns
Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : July 18th, 2021
“7th Sunday After Trinity ”

18 JULY 2021 – TRINITY 7

Read, Retreat, Rest, Relax, Recuperate

That was the title of the retreat I recently went on – with thanks to the Archdeacon and those of you who helped to cover for my absence. It was good to have time away in deepest Devon. It wasn't a silent retreat but I didn't spend much time mixing with the others. I think we were mainly clergy – though as the rule of the house is 'No Clergy Shop talk' it wasn't always easy to know for certain. But no matter – we were all there quietly to read, retreat, rest, relax and recuperate – and I thank God for that. For my part I spent quite a lot of time quietly sitting on a bench conveniently sited at the top of the 10-acre field in the grounds, just taking in the view, as well as sitting in the beautiful small 15th century stone chapel called 'The Chapel of Christ the Servant' – an unusual addition to a farmstead the size of Sheldon Retreat House.

Overall, it was good to stop after a hectic 15 months. Today, more than ever before, many people are tired and need to stop. That old phrase “stop the world, I want to get off” is a cry that many are now echoing, particularly at this stage of our world's history – with little that is certain or settled, even as Freedom Day beckons. Sometimes of course that cry “stop the world, I want to get off” is so great that it causes people to seek a complete change of career or to move away to a completely different part of the country, or even to emigrate altogether to make a fresh start. It's sometimes an appealing thought – being able to stop and start all over again. We all know that life today in our 21st century world has never been so pressured and busy – and certainly never more so than in these stressful times of coping with a ongoing virus and all its implications for so many throughout our world.

But then we realise that this is actually nothing new. We might be amazed to realise that even in 1st century Palestine, Jesus of Nazareth and his disciples felt similar pressures. Just look at Mark's account in today's Gospel reading.

The disciples descend on Jesus and bombard him with their (probably) over-enthusiastic reports of what they have been up to. But it was all too frenetic, with dozens, maybe hundreds of people still coming and going – so much so that they did not even have time to have a snack. Sound familiar to some of you? So, Jesus wisely commands them “come away to a deserted place by yourselves and rest awhile”. But even that didn't work as they were quickly recognised and pursued to their place of refuge. So, Jesus gives up trying to get away and resigns himself to teaching them many things because they were like sheep without a shepherd. The chapter ends with yet more people recognising Jesus and dashing up to him with their sick friends and relatives, begging him to heal them.

Note carefully the phrase: they **recognised** Jesus – and then did something about it. They saw him – not just saw his face but saw him for who he was – the man who could and did heal them of their sickness and infirmities. They recognise something special about Jesus which many of them couldn't quite put their finger on. And Jesus in turn saw them to be like sheep without a shepherd – and he immediately does something about it, and begins teaching them.

And thus it has always been. People are always chasing after many things, as the crowds were chasing after Jesus; people who have recognised their need for a rock on which to base their lives. Down the centuries of the Christian Church, there have always been those who have recognised Jesus for who he is and done something about it – sought to learn about him; sought to be committed to him through baptism and confirmation. People who have recognised Jesus of Nazareth as the son of God and realised that they want to become a follower. Sometimes that recognition has been there from birth. More often it is something that dawns on a person slowly and gradually. Many people say to me how important their churchgoing faith is to them, particularly through the difficult times in their lives. What's the helpfully encouraging phrase? “When you reach rock bottom, then you discover the rock”.

It is something that Paul speaks about in writing to the people of Ephesus: celebrating their recognition that they are no longer strangers and aliens but citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostle and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the rock, the cornerstone.

For us, in our turn, people might well recognise us and say “you go to that church on Copse Hill, don’t you” – they recognise us for where we belong – but hopefully they might not just know it because they have seen us going to and from church but also recognise it because of the difference that our churchgoing makes to our lives. They might see something of a calmness, a serenity in us, a sense of stability in us, a difference in our manner and so on – all because of our faith in God. They might even recognise that we are as sheep, led by the shepherd. I’m never convinced that referring to sheep is always appropriate – for people are not slightly daft creatures, but intelligent, mature, thinking human beings. We are those who when we were baptised were marked with the sign of the cross, a mark we carry with us for the whole of our lives; we were baptised with the water of baptism that never dries up.

Nevertheless, we should always want other people to recognise us for our Christian faith, for the difference it makes in our lives. Mind you, it doesn’t always work quite as we expect. One fairly active young child asked me this week “which is your church”. When I told him it was called Christ Church, he immediately said he knew it because “my sister goes to ballet there”. Out of the mouths....

Simon Gates, the Archdeacon, wrote to me this week after his recent visits: *“I had a great time both Sundays; thank you for asking me. I love your garden behind the hall, and found the congregation in very good heart.”* As we try to wade through the myriad of decisions we have to make in the coming days and as we try to bring our church life back to some kind of normality, may each of us be gentle with ourselves and try to find time, make time, to read, retreat, rest, relax and recuperate during these coming weeks – even if only to spend a bit of quiet time sitting in our beautiful new church garden or slipping into church on a Wednesday morning.

So I hope and trust we can be confident that, like a good shepherd, Jesus of Nazareth is concerned for our well-being and leads us carefully and safely through our pilgrim journeys so that, as Paul puts it, “in him we also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God”. May that be so for each one of us as we live and flourish in the wonderful if at times confusing and mad world that we all inhabit in 2021?

Generous God, you give us gifts and make them grow: though our faith is small as mustard seed, make it grow to your glory and the flourishing of your kingdom. Amen.