

Is there any person you can think of with whom you would like to spend some time – time and quiet just to be with them? Perhaps they could teach you important things or connect with the places in you that are hurting or lonely. Or you might want to be known and recognized by someone important, whose presence would make you feel worthwhile. Would you like an hour with the President of the United States or a beloved teacher you had in High School? Maybe you've heard sermons by a great preacher, and you felt as though if they went on forever you would sit at their feet and take it all in. I have often had that response to sermons by Marianne Budde or our Presiding Bishop.

I think that kind of desire helps us imagine just a bit of the experience of the crowds of people who wanted to see Jesus. As you'll recall, Jesus had made a boat trip across the Lake of Galilee, to find a bit of space and quietness with his disciples. He wanted them to be able to rest and talk with each other. They needed a chance to reflect on their recent journeys in pairs, through the countryside, to tell of their own gathering of the people for teaching and casting out demons.

But the plans for a kind of spiritual retreat were foiled by the crowds who hot-footed it around the lake of Galilee, to get to the other side ahead of Jesus and his disciples, to be there waiting when they came ashore. So there was already a crowd gathered when the boat scraped up on the beach. The Reverend Andrew Prior gives a wonderful description of the crowd:

The people feel that they are barely clinging to life. At any moment what they need could be snatched away from them and all would be lost. We should be able to feel this with them, as so many of us had this kind experience during the quarantine of the pandemic. It's no wonder that they were able to make such speed, running frantically on foot around the shore of the lake. "We must get there. We can't lose sight and sound of them."

And Jesus did not disappoint, but set aside his plans for rest in order to teach them. “As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

That phrase, ‘sheep without a shepherd’, has been used repeatedly throughout the Hebrew Bible to describe a people of Israel lost and wandering. When Moses was at the end of his life, God declared that he would take him to the top of a high mountain and let him look over into the promised land. But because of his sin of not putting full faith in God, he could not enter the land.

So, Moses spoke to the LORD, saying, ‘Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint someone over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep without a shepherd.’

While God’s own self is the ultimate guiding shepherd of all the people, that kind of presence of the holy is meant to be found, to at least some degree, in any who are in leadership or hold power. We just heard last week about Herod the King, feasting for his birthday with the wealthy and important of his people. In the course of the grand meal, he had John the Baptist killed and his head presented on a platter to his step-daughter who had pleased him with her dancing. Clearly, this so-called king has nothing of a shepherd in him. But Jesus, the incarnation of God, is the fulfillment of what Moses asked for his people so long before. He is the shepherd who has true compassion for the sheep.

We need to be clear that compassion is not the same as ‘sympathy’ or ‘pity’, for those are feelings that can easily be experienced at a distance, and do not necessarily call forth action. Compassion is never just a feeling, and is never distanced from

the other. The Greek word used here, *splagchnizomai*, refers to a person's inner organs. Thus, compassion is so deep it is felt in the guts, like a wrenching in the pit of the stomach. It has the intimacy of suffering with the one who suffers. This is Jesus' response to the frantic, anxious lostness of the crowd.

So out of his compassion, he teaches them. He teaches that they are brought into the Kingdom of God, where all will know 'Shalom', the fullness of justice, goodness and peace. The kingdom is a community of those who long for the presence of God. In my imagination the people sat around Jesus drinking in all that he had to offer them. They were being fed the very words of God, nourished by the logos.

I wonder if we can imagine our way into this scene. We spend so much of our lives in constant words of advertising, promise and persuasion, an ever-deepening swamp of superficial language. Our radios and televisions and streaming media don't give us a minute of space or silence in which we could open ourselves to the word of God. Do you wish you could be with that crowd, receiving the compassionate food of the Lord? Sometimes we imagine the life of Jesus among us as that of a miracle-worker. But what if we most long to sit at his feet and take in all he can teach us about our life with God.

Perhaps we need to remember that even when he ends up surrounded by all who have deep needs, Jesus did not abandon his own desire for rest in God. After the crowd had been dismissed, he withdrew to the top of the mountain, alone, to pray. We do not know the content of his connection with his heavenly father, but do know that he repeatedly sought this out.

This may be the deep lesson for us here. Come away, to a deserted place, all by yourself and rest awhile in the presence of God who will sustain and feed. Here we can let go of all the half-meaningless words that threaten to drown us every day. Here you can release your frantic anxiety and restless longing. Here you

can be brought home to your true self and to your creator. Let us reach for this daily support of our journey of life.