

8th Sunday after Trinity – 21st July 2024

Psalm 23, Ephesians 2:11-22, Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while'. In Domine...The gospel of Mark often reads as a frenzy of activity. The word 'immediately' is used approximately 40 times. Jesus is always onto the next thing and the pace of the text stands out. Small wonder this morning then that after so much activity, the disciples need rest. Perhaps you arrive this morning feeling the same.

In today's gospel, the crowds follow them even to what is meant to be a place of sanctuary. Throughout the gospels, Jesus' ministry is punctuated by these periods of deliberate withdrawal; Jesus going away to a quiet place to be alone and to pray. But he also models to us what it means to live a life always in communion with God the Father in both the busyness and in the stillness. There are whole passages in John's gospel where Jesus is praying and it's not always straightforward to separate those moments from when he's addressing his followers.

One of the things that can so easily take a back seat in the busyness of our lives is our call to pray. We're so often rushing from one thing to the next. Always looking to the next thing to be planned or organised. If we have small children or older relatives we help care for, their needs often take priority and fill our time. Our work can consume us. But we are, in the words of St Paul, to *'pray without ceasing'*. And yet so often the barriers to prayer seem manifold. How do we find that deserted place to which Jesus calls us within ourselves?

For if it's not tasks that swamp us, it can be the state of our minds. We can be like one of those snow scenes in a glass ball that we shake and all the pieces inside are floating. We can long for but can't seem to achieve that stillness, that clarity, that settling. The distractions float in and out. Prayer is about putting ourselves in the place where God can get to us and that task can be a challenge. I've had a number of conversations recently with people about their prayer lives; things that are getting in the way, recurring problems, questions about its efficacy.

As Christians we wish to be close to God and to trust Him; to cast our anxieties upon Him in trust and faith – as a child with its parent. We wish to grow in love of Him and be filled with His love, to be able to be as close to Him as Jesus was, to be still, at rest in the arms of the God who calls us and loves us, drawing us ever close to himself, and surrender all we are to Him.

The Jesus Prayer is a practice that grew out of Eastern Christianity: our teachers here are the Desert Fathers and Mothers from the fourth century and their collected wisdom. Most commonly the form of words has evolved into *'Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me'*.

It is a short and simply prayer that offers us a way of attentiveness to the holy name of Christ and his presence. We have to set aside our egos and repeat this mantra without being diverted by each thought and reaction. It's an attempt to be disciplined and vigilant in repeating this phrase and avoiding conversation with our own internal thoughts. It requires awareness, watchfulness and attention. Those of us who try to practice the Jesus Prayer are neither monks nor nuns. We simply want to pray better and more often. The Jesus Prayer helps us to understand the discipline we need to inhabit in prayer. Its utterance of the Holy Name of Jesus and its call for mercy is about bringing us back to our rightful place in relationship with God, seeking that deserted place of rest to which Jesus calls the disciples - *'Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me'*.

On a practical level, the Jesus Prayer offers us the opportunity to be used either as an intentional practice that is prayed at specific times of the day for a set period of time. The alternative is for it to be used randomly, at different times of the day, when we are involved in different activities or moved

spontaneously to pray. Prayer is a gift that is always available to us. I use this prayer when I'm walking to meet someone or on the tube on my own, even pushing a baby to sleep on the Cambridgeshire fens. It was a prayer I learnt first attending a silent prayer group at Hornsey parish church about twelve years ago. The words can be combined with our pattern of breathing. Inhaling on the first part – *'Jesus Christ son of God'* and exhaling with *'have mercy on me'*. The focus on these words alone calls us back time and again in repetition, letting distractions just skim over the surface of our minds as they come and instead attending deeply to this short phrase. It can be recited during those scattered moments that may otherwise be lost to prayer as I garden or sweep the flow; as I wait for a bus or stand wedged into a packed carriage. The Jesus Prayer is never out of place and always acts as a way of gathering my consciousness from a place of fragmentation towards wholeness in God.

When we pray the Jesus Prayer we are immersing ourselves in a very ancient tradition which is firmly in the contemplative mould but that can be easily adapted to a contemporary lifestyle. It encourages us to live a disciplined life of attention to God.

If you feel like your life of prayer needs some direction or structure then using this method of prayer might be something a small group of us could take on together with the formation of a silent prayer group that could meet in the week here? Or it might be a practice you want to explore using on your own.

Coming to a deeper understanding and practice of prayer is at the core of our shared life together here. Often we assume prayer is just about asking for things, presenting a wish list. We can think its about trying to persuade God to be nice to us. We can think prayer is a last resort in times of crisis, about feeling safe or protected or a specialised activity and the reserve of the very religious.

Instead prayer is risky, its about shedding our own securities and self-concern and coming before God as our true selves, learning to see ourselves and each other as God sees us. God is always more ready to hear us than we are to pray and a method such as the Jesus Prayer can help us tune in more regularly to that frequency.

Prayer is our soul's journey towards that deserted place where Jesus calls the disciples to rest, towards the trustful, seemingly unsophisticated apprehension of the little child. *'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while'. 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me'*.