

2 Samuel 7:1-14a Psalm 23 Ephesians 2:11-22. Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure...

Summer is traditionally the time of year when many people take their leisure and go on holiday. Yet the idea of going on holiday, or vacation as we Americans usually call it, is a relatively new concept, dating back only to the middle of the nineteenth century and the gradual development of a middle-class, one which could afford to, well, go on holiday. But by the end of that century, even common people often had the financial means to spend time away from home and work. And thus, the leisure industry, surely an oxymoron if there ever was one, was born.

The notion of going on holiday was, however, initially not without controversy in that strait-laced and Puritan society, now often called the Victorian Age. Clergy in particular were suspicious of the idleness which a holiday implied and of the sins which were sure to follow from such indolence. After all idleness, as everyone knew, was the devil's workshop. Just imagine the horrible possibilities, thought many a priest and minister: People sunbathing, people playing cards, taking naps in the middle of the day, dancing in the evening, having a tippie perhaps; and possibly even worse. The rest I leave to your imaginations.

The problem was eventually resolved however as many of those same clerics who originally objected to vacations and holidays on principle hit upon the then novel idea of establishing bible camps, quite possibly the world's first all-inclusive resorts, places where families could holiday on the cheap under the careful watch of the Church and vicar and without fear of the temptations of unsupervised time to themselves. Such bible camps still exist of course, although mostly, it seems, for children only.

Of course, our Lord seems to have hit upon the idea of bible camp long before anyone else, as we see attested in our account this morning from the Gospel of Mark. The account actually contains, as you may have noticed, two short narratives knit together here but separated in fact by two miracle stories of our Lord, two stories which the Church saves for other occasions. But in any case, we find people following after Jesus and "coming and going," and rushing about, behaving like "sheep without a shepherd," as the text has it, about as accurate a description as well of twenty-first century life, as you and I know it.

Within this maelstrom of activity, even our Lord himself and his disciples, here by the way for the first time in the Gospel of Mark called Apostles, have been busy. Just returned from the first of their mission journeys, the Apostles are keen to tell our Lord of "all that they had done and taught." It must have been quite a tale. And it is at this point that Jesus decides enough is enough. Boys: it is time for a holiday. It is time for Bible Camp. And so, he and the Apostles get into a boat and head for a deserted place where they can be by themselves and "rest a while."

Yet, it does not quite work out that way, as throngs of people learn of Jesus's whereabouts and his presence among them and again of course seek him out. No rest apparently for the weary. No holiday for Jesus and the Apostles. Not at this point anyway. Jesus heals those brought to him and, as the Gospel narrative explains, "he had compassion for them," an expression which in the original Greek conveys a sense of great solicitude, empathy, and love; something far beyond simply feeling sorry for someone. Far beyond a tap on the shoulder or a kind word.

Our Lord genuinely loved the people who gathered around him, and they instinctively knew it and responded in turn. They were indeed like sheep without a shepherd; directionless and desperate. Yet our Lord experienced with them their sense of hopelessness and despair, and he brought them encouragement and the assurance of God's presence in their lives, of God's love, something we all still crave all these centuries later. Jesus had compassion for them.

And "he began to teach them many things," in the words of the Gospel. Oddly, Mark does not get around to telling us what those "many things" might have been, and scholars and clerics have long pondered what to make of this. I for one would like to know what those "many things" actually were. We might simply surmise that they had something to do with the love of God for his people. And not just for the rich and famous of course. But for villagers and farmers and the poor and the refugees and economic migrants, those who are sick and in need of healing. Indeed, wherever he went Jesus brought healing, a sure sign of God's presence even amid the hubbub of everyday life in any century or culture.

Mark does not tell us if Jesus and the disciples ever finally got their well-deserved vacation or holiday, their first-century bible camp. Still, as many of us will be away this summer on holiday, perhaps we should remind ourselves once again of our Lord and his disciples, and of those early resorts of the nineteenth century, and make at least a part of our summer get-away a bible camp of the soul, a time to sort ourselves spiritually and, like the people of Jesus' time, to learn the "many things" he has to teach us. Jesus' followers had found their shepherd, even in a deserted place across the Sea, and they were determined to listen to him. We could do worse than to follow their example.

Amen.

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