

16th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (July 18, 2021)

You may be wondering where the speaker is for our annual mission appeal that was to be presented this weekend. I found out this past Wednesday that he wasn't able to come after all because of some necessary paperwork on his end that was not completed on time; we will try to get that rescheduled. In the meantime, I'm sorry to say that you are going to hear from me today after all—maybe you can consider that an early installment on your Lenten penance for next year...

The more we hear and read the gospels, the more we recognize the reality of Jesus' divine power. His many miracles certainly attest to that fact—healings of all kinds, raising people from the dead, his power over nature itself (like calming the violent storm on the sea). Next Sunday we will hear again one of his most well-known miracles: multiplying five loaves of bread and two fish into enough to feed 5000+ people. Jesus can do such things, after all, because he is truly God the Son, fully divine and fully one with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

But let's not forget the fact that along with his divine nature, Jesus also had and has a fully human nature—the great mystery of the Incarnation. The divine Word was conceived in Mary's womb by the Holy Spirit, but in taking on our bodily human nature that he received from his Mother, Jesus entered into this world sharing fully in our own physical flesh-and-blood existence. That means that he knew and experienced everything we know and experience in our bodily existence...with the one and only exception of sin. Jesus was born as a baby who needed to be cared for just like we were. He grew up as a child; St. Luke in his gospel says he 'progressed steadily in wisdom and age and grace' (Luke 2:52) just like we did in our growing-up years. He worked first as a carpenter before he began his public teaching and ministry just like we work in our jobs and careers. He ate and drank; he needed physical sustenance just like we do. He knew and experienced emotions like joy and sorrow, fear and even frustration just like we do. And, of course, he experienced death just like every one of us will do.

The gospel today reminds us of another aspect of our human nature that Jesus fully experienced. St. Mark tells us that after the apostles told Jesus all they had done and taught, he told them to 'come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.' And he needed that rest for himself as well—Jesus knew what it means to be tired, to have no energy left, to need a break every once in a while...just like we do. I've mentioned to you the series "The Chosen"—an excellent treatment of the story of Jesus. One of the episodes shows Jesus being present to a long line of people who come to him with their illnesses or other problems, and at the end of the day he nearly stumbles back to his tent because he is utterly exhausted. A quick sidenote: "The Chosen" is, in my humble opinion, the very best portrayal of the gospel story that I have ever seen (and I've seen quite a few over the years). It's not available on regular TV (cable or otherwise), but you can watch it for free on the internet—just do a search for "The Chosen". I also plan to begin offering times for us to watch it together on DVD and then have discussion time after each episode; stay tuned for further details.

Back to today's gospel: Jesus is tired and so are the apostles, and he urges them to take a break, put their feet up, and recharge their personal batteries. But then what happens? Mark tells us that they did indeed go off to a deserted place, but the crowd saw them leaving, told others about

it, and then sped on their way to meet them. When Jesus and the apostles got there, he saw the big crowd and ‘his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.’

Jesus is certainly an incomprehensible mystery in so many ways; we don’t know on a personal level what it is like to heal the sick or raise someone from the dead or calm a stormy sea. But we all most certainly know what it’s like to experience that ‘dead-tired’ feeling, when our gas tank seems completely empty. For example: parents, you know full well that your children need and demand your constant care and attention along with other responsibilities. And when you finally get a chance to sit down and grab a five-minute breather, how often did you hear “Mo-o-m!! Da-a-d!!”, and you think to yourself “well, so much for that restful moment...”? The same thing happens to all of us, whether we are farmer, business person, homemaker, teacher, priest—whatever our vocation or state of life. We may indeed be truly dedicated to our life calling, but we also know and are often reminded that we are not machines. We need to take a break every once in a while, even as the next responsibility or the next item on the ‘must-do’ list stares us right in the face.

At those times, let’s remember that there is One who knows precisely what we are experiencing in our emptiness and exhaustion...because he experienced it as well. Let’s remember that we are blessed with a Shepherd, the Good Shepherd, who leads us to restful waters and refreshes our souls. Matthew’s gospel preserves for us Jesus’ wonderful, life-restoring invitation: “Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you...your souls will find rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden light” (Matt. 11:28...30). I know it may sound like nothing more than a cliché to say ‘turn to Jesus in your need/frustration/weariness’, but it’s a funny thing about clichés: how often they are based on rock-solid truth!

Some of you may be familiar with Clarence Enzler’s “Everyman’s Way of the Cross”, a popular version of that Lenten devotional. In the third station, “Jesus Falls [the first time]”, Enzler offers this reflection: “The God who made the universe...becomes, as man, too weak to bear a piece of timber’s weight. How human in his weakness is the Son of Man...Lord Jesus, how can I refuse? I willingly accept my weaknesses, my irritations and my moods, my headaches and fatigue, all my defects of body, mind, and soul...Make me content with all my discontents, but give me strength to struggle after You.”

In all our weakness and weariness, in our exhaustion and our frustration, let’s not forget to turn to Christ and pray and plead for rest we need and the grace to carry on, to refresh our souls with the life-giving and life-restoring water he has for us. He wants to give us what we need and he knows precisely what we need...because he experienced that same need himself.