

Jesus and Solitude

Psalm 62 1-8.
Luke 5:15,16.

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Our short reading is one of many throughout the Gospels which tell of Jesus withdrawing from the noisy crowds, it wasn't because he wanted to get away from them. It was to find a quiet place to pray, to be with His Father. It sounds as if this was something Jesus needed to do regularly, to restore himself. To enable Him to be more available to the people he had come to serve.

Finding a place of solitude was often quite a challenge for Jesus because he was in great demand and crowds would follow him everywhere. Seeking solitude is linked with spending time in silence. In fact "silence and solitude" are well known as a spiritual discipline.

Even when we live alone we can fill our lives with sound 24/7. Keeping busy and occupied can help us feel we are living productive lives. Sometimes it suits us not to give ourselves space to think but just to keep going.

8million adults live alone in this country. Loneliness can bring with it a raft of health problems, loneliness is inner emptiness but silence and solitude, as a spiritual discipline, brings inner fulfilment. It's not like a sponsored silence shutting ourselves away as an endurance test. It's choosing to offer our time to God to focus on Him. To hear Him speak to us. It's a way of praying.

Our current sermon series challenges us to learn more of the real Jesus, his character, his identity. Jesus was uniquely God and totally human at the same time. The amazing thing is the more we learn about Jesus and connect with Him the more we will learn about ourselves, our identity in Christ, in other words, becoming the person God created us to be. The big question! How do we do this? Our efforts alone will not make this happen. This process of transformation is God's gift to us. We can choose to be open to being changed and the main tool God uses for this is relationship, as I hope to explain.

The Christian Faith is all about relationships. As Jon said last week we are all a family. A church family. God longs for everyone to join his family and know His Son. When we say "yes" to God, yes to knowing Jesus, we begin a journey.

We grow and change as we travel on our Christian journey. But this faith journey is not a straightforward, linear journey, travelling from A to B. It's a relational journey with all its ups and downs, stops and starts, as we resist God or as we say yes to Him. Spending time in Silence and solitude is one of the ways we can help our inner transformation. Sitting in silence might feel like a waste of time, but in the upside down world of the kingdom of God, it's far from it.

Jon asked me to speak today as he said he felt I was better equipped to speak on Silence and Solitude having completed a 30day silent retreat last summer. I'm not sure why as Jon frequently goes on quiet days and retreats. Going on a retreat may sound to you a very

strange thing to do; particularly one as long as 30 days. 3 years ago I would have thought anyone who went on one was a religious frantic! I'll leave you to judge!

Retreats are wonderful opportunities for silence and solitude. I loved the peace and quiet of the retreat. It helped me focus on my prayers and stay close to God. The silence was rarely a problem for me but then I'm an introvert. I don't think Jon is! In some ways it was a relief for me not to make polite conversations over meals. Every 24 hours I would talk for just 45 mins, with my spiritual director and that was it. I could be on my own in my room, in the grounds but I was one of 65 people in the retreat house so I wasn't alone.

I would love to encourage you to give silence and solitude a try. I've got 3 other thoughts as to why it's a good idea.

Firstly it really helps our prayer life and to hear from God. As we've heard Jesus would withdraw to deserted places to pray. Jesus tells us to follow him. To do the same as he does. If Jesus needed to be strengthened and sustained by spending time with his Father God, how much more do we?

Mother Teresa once said " if we really want to pray we must first learn to listen, for in the silence of the heart God speaks."

When we have a go at silence we will soon become aware of internal noise, our thoughts and feelings distracting us, if we allow these to quieten, we will start to hear the still small voice of God.

Secondly once we start to get used to times of silence and solitude we will be more aware of God's love for us and begin to notice a change in our relationships with others. We will gradually grow in compassion and patience, and be more able to listen to them.

We heard Psalm 62 read to us earlier. "For God alone my soul waits in silence". This and other Psalms make great prayers. They help us express our feelings to God, even when we are fed up, hurt and angry. They remind us that "Everything I need comes from Him"(Msg Ps 62). The more that truth seeps in to the core of us we will no longer be looking to others to meet our needs. This means we can be more available to them and as a result our relationships improve.

Thirdly in silence and solitude God gives us the gift of self knowledge. Recognising our identity in Christ. As we seek to know Jesus more we will learn to know and accept ourselves so much better. Jesus tells us "to love our neighbour as ourselves". Loving our neighbours isn't easy at the best of times but it's virtually impossible if we don't love and accept ourselves in a healthy way. This is a real challenge. There seems to be so much in our society that is aimed to make us feel bad about ourselves. We aren't the right size, we don't get invited to trendy parties, we don't earn enough money.

This is one of the dangers of social media. It pushes us into comparing ourselves when we are each unique. It's our life journey, all the life experiences we have had, that make us who we are. This is all we have to offer anyone, God, our family and friends.

To conclude, In silence and solitude we grow in prayer, in ability to tune into God's voice, compassion and self knowledge. If we offer the gift of ourselves give back to God, He generously responds and we are transformed from the inside out. At the same time our relationships will improve. It's one of the wonderful mysteries of the Christian Faith.

May I invite you to try a short silent way of praying as we sit here together