

## Rest a while

21<sup>st</sup> July 2024, St Leonard's Denmark, Alison Kershaw

Sunday after Pentecost between 17 & 23 July [16] B

*Psalm 23, Ephesians 2.11-22, Mark 6.3-34, 53-56*

Jesus said, *Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.* (Mark 6.31)

Our emotional response to this invitation might tell us a lot about the current state of our minds and hearts. If you feel like falling into the arms of these words, perhaps you are in need of a rest from all the 'comings and goings' in your life. Some of us may have a number of people claiming our time and attention – but we don't need to be frantically busy or in demand to feel overwhelmed; many things – both in the crazy world at large, and in our own mixed-up psyches - can crowd our minds and disturb our peace. We need to pay as much attention to these practical words of Jesus as the parables, the teachings and the healings. *Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.*

*Come away* – take yourselves physically apart from the things that weary you – that might mean staying home or leaving home - going on a simple solitary walk or taking a longer journey, or even pilgrimage.

*to a deserted place* – a place of silence, away from multiple voices and noise pollution, away from observing eyes and expectations.

*all by yourselves* - we may need solitude to find calm, but this is also an invitation to the group – to find peace together. What a beautiful thought, the 12 and Jesus, and perhaps the 'certain women' mentioned by Luke (8.1-3), pushing offshore in a boat, falling quiet to the lapping of waves. There can be companionable silence, there can also be the space to wander off by yourself knowing that there are those who understand your need to be alone, but who await your return. In this quietness it is easier to listen to what your body is telling you, to stop projecting versions of yourself, to be honest with yourself, and find yourself again.

*and rest a while* – humans need rest, indeed all creatures, and even plants, take rest. Christianity is a spirituality grounded by the incarnation. Our saviour, the gospels tell us, "often withdrew to lonely places and prayed," he takes refreshment with friends, and does not wish anyone to know where he is staying, he sleeps on a cushion in the stern of a storm tossed boat.<sup>1</sup> Jesus is resting and communing with God in these moments – energy is being gathered, wisdom is distilling – and he urges us to do the same.

A passage from the Australian cartoonist and, some would say, mystic, Michael Leunig, sprang to mind as I pondered this invitation. The book *The Curly Pyjama Letters* is dedicated "to unusual friendships" and the introduction describes the collection as:

...a small fragment of the vast correspondence known to have taken place between lone voyager Vasco Pyjama and his friend and mentor Mr Curly of Curly Flat. While domestic contentment and ease with the natural world are Mr Curly's major attributes, Vasco's restless nature has compelled him into a great voyage of discovery. In the company of his direction-finding duck, he has wandered far and wide, risking, finding, enjoying and observing much.

Vasco swings between near ecstatic freewheeling states to dismay and despondency. He writes to Mr Curly:

How we have wallowed too deeply in the history of man's inhumanity to man – the endless stories of 'who did what to whom' and how little we have known or cared or understood about man's cruel persecution of nature, the animals and the earth. ... In the light of all this, Curly, I ask you as I ask myself each morning. "WHAT IS WORTH DOING AND WHAT IS WORTH HAVING?" These are big questions and I am curious about your answers. I look forward to hearing from you. For the time being I have my faith and I am doing what I can. Yours cheerfully and entirely seriously, Vasco Pyjama xxx

Dear Vasco, In response to your question "what is worth doing and what is worth having?" I would like to say simply this. It is worth doing nothing and having a rest; in spite of all the difficulty it may cause, you must rest Vasco – otherwise you will become RESTLESS!

I believe the world is sick with exhaustion and dying of restlessness. While it is true that periods of weariness help the Spirit to grow, the prolonged, ongoing state of fatigue to which the world seems to be rapidly adapting is ultimately soul destroying as well as earth destroying. ... Tiredness is one of our strongest, most noble and instructive feelings. It is an important aspect of our CONSCIENCE and must be heeded or else we will not survive. When you are tired you must HAVE that feeling and you must act upon it sensibly – you MUST rest like the trees and animals do ... So I gently urge you Vasco, do as we do in Curly Flat – learn to curl up and rest – feel your noble tiredness – learn about it and make a generous place

for it in your life and enjoyment will surely follow. I repeat: it's worth doing nothing and having a rest.  
Yours sleepily, Mr. Curly xxx

It seems Vasco takes this advice, reporting some time later, "I have done little travelling lately because I have been so dreadfully weary" and wonders if this weariness comes not from all that he has been doing, but

I have a peculiar feeling Curly, that I am worn out from something I haven't yet done and the more I don't do it, the more exhausted I become. How strange. Could it be something I haven't said? Something I haven't realised Perhaps it's something I haven't finished! It must be very large and true whatever it is and a lively struggle in the doing but I look forward to it immensely. I know I need it. First, however, I must curl up in my chair and sleep deeply with the duck. Perhaps I'll dream of this and wake up refreshed and do it. My fond wishes to you Mr Curly, and to all at Curly Flat.<sup>ii</sup>

So, we can see the causes of what Mr Curly calls 'noble tiredness' are varied – the disciples are so busy doing good work they have no time to even eat, Vasco is exhausted with angst over the current state of world affairs, and then by the thought of all the things he has not done, yet yearns to do. And the answer, Vasco discovers, is to first listen to what the body is saying, and curl up and sleep deeply with the direction finding duck who personifies instinct and conscience – those things that go to work in our resting and dreaming state and prepare us for what may come next, and for action.

Now as we read on in the gospel, we see the peace sought by the disciples did not last long – only as long as the journey by boat – as the crowds had seen them depart and hurried to reach the supposedly deserted shore before them. Jesus knows it is not possible to hide away forever – he knows there is always the work of love and healing to be done. He has compassion for the crowd – and there are so very many of them – from all the surrounding villages, cities, and farms – and they are so desperately in need of healing for themselves and for their loved ones who they carry on mats. *They begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak.*

At first, we may think of ourselves as being like the disciples – helpers, carers, workers, or seekers like Vasco – in need of a rest – but then as the focus shifts to those reaching out to touch even the fringe of Jesus' cloak, we might think on how we, or those we love, are in need of this touch. We have often spoken about healing as holistic and not simply physical, but we might be further asking ourselves what, exactly, is meant by finding the peace of Christ, or how the risen Christ heals us - we who can only touch the hem of his garment in a spiritual sense. In our liturgies and hymns we praise the Jesus who rises with healing in his wings and the good shepherd of our souls. Somehow we absorb these staggering concepts and can feel immensely comforted and assured of the presence of divine love; but sometimes some of us struggle to relate to what is being said.

At each eucharist we affirm that *we* are the body of Christ and it is through our collective caring – when we are as Christ to one another - that healing love takes concrete form. This is part of the answer to our questions – but this mystic body of which we are a part, is ultimately that – a very great cosmic mystery that will "gather up all things" into itself, according to a follower of Paul in the Letter to the Ephesians (1.1-14) In this week's passage we have another analogy - of knowing ourselves as members of the household of God with Christ as the cornerstone. It speaks about the healing of division and the unification of all people in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile (how many more divisions might we name in our world, and how we long for the universal peace here described): "*In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.*"(Eph 2.11-22) Bill Loader sees the goal of this, not as "withdrawal to another source of power beyond all things" but as "coming home to the source of love within all things which is seeking to bring and hold them together."<sup>iii</sup>

So perhaps we can know the healing of Christ in both these ways: through the touch of others as we grow into the body of Christ and build up this holy temple together; and in solitude and as we respond to the invitation *to come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.* For this invitation is to come home, to enter the temple within and find that the source of love, healing, and wholeness that we are so desperate to touch, dwells there. Psalm 23 so beautifully describes our dwelling in God –but as we dwell in God, so God dwells in us, as we lay down in green pastures, as we are led beside still waters - as our souls are refreshed. May we find prayerful companionship in this household. May we curl up and come home to a place of rest within ourselves, and may peace and healing love radiate from our still centre to touch all those we encounter. Amen

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<sup>i</sup> Luke 5:16, Mark 11:12, Mark 7:24, Mark 4.35-41

<sup>ii</sup> Michael Leunig, *The Curly Pyjama Letters*, Viking, 2001, pp.23-28, 37-38.

<sup>iii</sup> William Loader, First Thoughts on Year B Epistle Passages in the Lectionary, Pentecost 9: 21 July 2024 Ephesians 2.11-22 (<https://billloader.com/BEpPentecost9Ord16.html>)