

Come away with me...
Sermon on Mark 6: 6b-13+30-32

Sisters and brothers,

let's be honest... what do you do when everything gets too much? When everything gets on top of you? When the demands of everyday life are just overwhelming, and you no longer know what to do and how to cope?

This is a situation that happens to all of us, often, sometimes day by day, isn't it? We all know it so well. And all the others around us do too.

It seems to be a well-known challenge, learning how to see and accept our limits – and to see the limits in other people's lives too.

It is also a challenge to notice early enough when we or they are up to our limits or when it is necessary to retreat – either way... because I myself need peace and quiet, or because the other person needs to withdraw and recuperate.

In the gospel of Luke we have a short verse about Jesus going out to the mountain to pray through the night...

In the gospel of Mark there is this passage about Jesus' disciples being ever so busy and successful, and when they come back to Jesus and tell him all about it, he takes them on one side and says:

“Come away with me...”, because they were so much in demand that they didn't even have time to eat.

It seems as if Jesus had a clear sense of when he and others needed time out, time for themselves, time nobody was supposed to disturb.

And what he does is so easy. He simply withdraws to a lonely place.

He doesn't complain about people being so demanding. He doesn't blame all those sick and lame who obviously and understandably need him. No.

He simply leaves for the solitary place; finds some free time, with freedom for his thoughts, prays to his God and gets in touch with the source from which he draws energy and strength. For some moments he feels one with his father, one with the divine, and that saves him from being eaten up by the needs and demands of others.

Then what he discovers as so important for himself, he shares with his disciples.

His helpers, those he'd chosen and trained to assist and support him, should have the same experience. “Come away with me...”

He'd called his disciples to do what before only he could do. Because he could clearly see that the work was getting too much for him and that he needed support.

And with this he impresses me just as much as Moses does, when he takes on his father-in-law's advice to share the burden of the task of leadership with other qualified people.

It is a healing lesson to learn, don't you agree, to accept your limits and to recognize early enough, when and where we need both: retreat and support. Doing this early enough will save us from ending up in all those terrible feelings of anger, frustration, fear and despair... and on top of all those, guilt.

It takes courage to say No.

No, thank you, I already have enough on my plate.

No, so sorry, I can't do this, Monday is my day off.

Or: I am awfully sorry, I can't come to more than three evening meetings per week, because I really need my sleep.

It takes courage to openly show and admit to our limits. Some people will only slowly come to understand. And others may never.

Some may call us selfish. Some may think we are lazy. Others may try to make us feel guilty... But guilt is surely not the basis on which we should meet needs and fulfil requests! Nor is it the will of God, despite the suggestions of other people; despite that whispering voice from childhood telling us always to put ourselves last...

Being able to set boundaries and express limits is a sign of competence rather than an inability or a sign of incompetence!

“Come away with me...”

If I take time out at the right time and to the right rhythm, I may be able to avoid exhaustion and burn-out, which don't serve anybody, but rather make everybody feel awful and guilty.

Jesus saw his limits, followed an inner desire to retreat and set a clear boundary, when he spent the night on this mountain in prayer.

He'd allowed himself a whole night...!

In the case of his disciples in the passage from the gospel of Mark, it is only a few moments, maybe an hour, in which the disciples recover and rest, before they are met again by the crowds, and Jesus gets them to help feed the 5000.

The disciples had no leisure to eat, we are told in verse 31. (This is part of the reason why Jesus takes them away “in the boat to a deserted place”...)

We never get to know whether they actually have something to eat while they are on the boat, before they are asked to feed the masses in verse 37.

Ironic in a way.

And I just want to hope and believe that Jesus was human enough and wise enough not to exploit his friends but to provide what they really needed.

Time out is something sacred.

And so is the ability to delegate some tasks to others.

Whether it is some moments, a few hours, an evening or a whole day, time out is what keeps us in balance...

...what enables us to stay calm, cool and sane.

And: what helps us to function long-term.

I love the easiness with which Jesus is able to set limits. He seems to have a natural strategy of marking the boundary and taking a break.

And since he can't possibly send away every single person who comes and seeks his help, he takes his disciples and sets off for a place where they can be alone.

It would cost far too much energy to say No over and over again, to explain, to protect... no way he could do that. So he chooses a retreat, and there his disciples find time and space to report, share and rest.

None of them is superman. None of them is without needs and desires. None of them can be used or exploited to breaking point!
“Come away with me...”

In his book “Setting limits – respecting boundaries”, the German monk Anselm Gruen shares with his readers, how difficult he finds it to say No. He admits to the fact that he is always angry and frustrated when again and again people manage to persuade him to take on tasks which he initially wasn't going to agree to. Since the anger which then rises only costs him energy and throws him off balance, he has developed a strategy to protect himself. Whenever he is asked a task or a favour, he takes some time for reflection, in which he can sort out his thoughts, doubts and feelings, in which he can consult a friend, or just sleep on it overnight.

And since as a priest and a counsellor he is very much in demand, he's decided to have clearly defined 'times out'. One day and one evening per week are his. Alone. So is Sunday afternoon...

And because he sticks to his own rules and routines, it is now so much easier for him to respond to people's requests.

Times of retreat are only ignored in cases of absolute and utter emergency...

At all other times Anselm Gruen regards his 'taboo-zones', as he calls them, as sacred.

And he explains what he means by “sacred”.

Sacred, he writes, is what lies outside the everyday world.

Sacred is time and space without demands.

Sacred is what belongs to him alone, what nourishes him.

Sacred is what helps him find his balance, feel his centre, be him-self.

Sacred is what heals him, what enables him to feel one with God, and what cleans and purifies him.

Sacred is what takes away the gloomy and negative and fills him with new energy and enthusiasm.

He doesn't share with his readers, where his sacred places are or what he does to get there.

He just lets us know what they mean to him and what they do for him. And that encourages me to find my own.

If I apply his “list” of what sacred means to him, to my life, I must of course ask:

What lies outside my everyday world?

Where is the time and space without demands in my life?

What belongs to me alone?

What nourishes me?

What helps me to find my balance, my centre, my-self?

What heals me?

When do I feel one with God?

What purifies me?
And what is it that gives me new energy...
and fills me with passion and enthusiasm?

Whatever the sacred in your life is...
it is rituals and routines which help us to get in touch with it.
And often it is only moments or glimpses of something whole and healing that
keep me going.
Such moments need to be cherished and protected.

In the story in which Jesus takes his disciples away in the boat, it is the crowd
who do not respect the boundary he has set. They kind of take a detour and catch
up with Jesus and the disciples, and everyday life and demands are all around
them again.

On the one hand there was Jesus' wish to protect his disciples... and himself.
On the other hand there was his immediate compassion for the people.
So he taught them and the disciples fed them.
And what was left for the disciples was the fond memory of a few sacred moments
of peace and quiet, alone with their master in the boat...

...besides twelve baskets of leftover broken bread for the crowd.

We can only hope and pray that the time spent in retreat was enough to keep the
disciples going for another series of days walking and working with Jesus, - until
he hopefully would say again:
"Come away with me..."
...and again give them what kept them going.

We have no idea whether Jesus and his disciples took breaks on a regular basis.
But we know that for a life lived over years, and a task fulfilled long-term and
successfully, we need to get away from it all from time to time. We need to retreat
and withdraw, to rest and recuperate in order to keep going.
It is as simple as that.
It takes courage to set boundaries.
It needs wisdom to accept limits.
But believe me, every now and again it is worthwhile to follow Jesus' voice when
he says: "Come away with me..."

...meet the sacred
here in church
in bread and wine
in sun, moon and stars
in holidays and on holy days...
here and there
find peace and quiet
restore your balance

come away...

Prayer

Yes, Lord – I will come.
I can hear your call,
I may take your hand
and be led to the places of peace and quiet,
so that I can come back
restored,
and fill other people's lives with peace and quiet.
In your name, three in one God. Amen.