

**NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 22 JULY 2012, PENTECOST 8**

Mark 6: 34- 56, "Where God is"

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This morning Mark's gospel gives us another day in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. A busy day, packed with activity. It starts with the debriefing of the disciples after their first independent foray into ministry, then there is the feeding of 5000 hungry people, some prayer time, a boat trip with a walk on water, followed by another bout of ambling around the countryside, with Jesus healing the sick wherever he goes.



Exhausting!

Did it really all happen in a day? Probably not. The gospel is not written to give us an actual, factual, historical, blow by blow account of the life of one Jesus of Nazareth. The gospel is propaganda. Condensing three years of ministry in a book that would give you a fair idea of who and what Jesus was in a couple of hours reading. So what a gospel writer packs into a day may not actually have happened in a day. Then again, people involved in ministry know that days like the one described are not that uncommon. Not coincidentally recent research shows that ministry leads to burn out in more than 80% of people working in the field. Their every day job filled with activities similar to the ones filling Jesus' day in this chapter. They are involved in debriefing after mission and ministry activities have been undertaken, involved in physically or spiritually feeding thousands of people, they lead worship, prayer, and where they may not be walking on water, they are more often than not walking a tightrope supporting people in life and death situations, and constantly on the move trying to bring healing and wholeness where they go.

So yes, a busy and exhausting day, but come to think of it, perhaps not half as extraordinary as it may at first instance sound. A day of ministry and ministering to people in many different ways.

Perhaps that is the first thing we may get out of this passage: That Jesus was busy, as busy as many pastors and volunteers who are active in ministry are today. That he lived a lifestyle as varied, active and exhaustive as many of us are trying to cope with.

I believe we are justified to connect our life with what happens in the story. I think the gospels intend for us to identify with what happens to Jesus and/or to the people around him and apply them to what we experience in our own lives, either to learn, be guided, inspired or supported by them. To make this possible the gospels try to communicate on several different levels at once with people who were at different stages in their faith journey and came from a variety of backgrounds. They were written to promote the new faith, to promote the way of Jesus of Nazareth and the idea that in him God's self was revealed in his particular flesh and bone. Written for people who were finding their way into the Christian faith, as well as for those who had been committed to it for a while. Trying to answer questions like: Who is this Jesus we are following? What is expected from his followers? What can his followers expect when they decide to follow him? What might happen to them and to those around them if they follow in his footsteps?

So how do we see that reflected in our readings this morning?

First we meet the disciples, the inner circle of Jesus' followers upon their return from their first independent ministry and mission appointment. Field placement students returning from an assignment who can't stop talking about all the activities and teaching they've been involved in. This is great stuff. They have gone out, they have engaged in ministry and they return with tall tales to tell. That's what ministry can be like, and I hope you, like me, have experienced times like that. Where hard work pays off and ministry is inspiring, energising, exhilarating and exhausting all at the same time. I think we can imagine them, like they are pictured on the front of the order of service, hanging out under a tree, sharing experiences, breaking bread, relaxing, taking a nap. "Come" Jesus says, "Come away with me to a quiet place". Showing us that Jesus does not only call those who follow him to go and be active, but also invites them to come back to him to spend time reflecting and relaxing, to rest in a place away from the demands of the world around them. Showing us that ministry is not only a call to an active, involved and often exhausting life. As a follower of Jesus we are invited to a balanced life, with activity and rest, going out and returning to base to share and recharge. So, says the gospel to those who are new to the movement, or even those who may still be considering to join: this is the lifestyle you'll be looking forward to. Active but balanced, sent out to minister, but supported by a strong home base.

Those already on the inside and involved in ministry are reminded that the active side of life in faith should be balanced by times of reflection and rest, even if there is always more that should, or could be done. And those who are called to leadership in the community it calls for the provision of a firm base to return to, to encourage the faith community to be active as well as calling them to rest and reflect at regular intervals. That's the pattern an active Christian ministry and mission should be based on. *Ora et Labora*. Prayer and work.

However. It doesn't always work that way, and that's another thing followers of Jesus will have to learn. When they arrive at their retreat destination, instead of a deserted place and a well deserved rest, they find a great crowd "milling around like sheep without a shepherd..." People in need, hungry for Jesus' stories and wisdom, yearning for his touch, seeking healing and wholeness. And, with a sigh? Jesus buckles down once more, because his compassion is greater than his own need for rest. But what about the disciples? Their hearts must have sank when they saw them all. Too many, too late in the day, too much to do. They argue with Jesus. They'd hoped for a bit of a break. But no, more people, more ministry, more mission, more work to be done. Just when you think you're reasonably on top of things, something happens, and you can't but get up and do whatever it is that needs to be done. It's not that there is no rest for the wicked, it is more that once your eyes have been opened to the needs of others, to their yearning and hunger, it is impossible to ignore what comes your way. And the crowd? We can probably imagine all too well how they were feeling. Looking for direction, for inspiration, for wholeness and healing for their battered souls, they've found this man who seems to be able to work miracles and they latch onto him. They will follow him anywhere because they want to be near to whatever it is he carries with him and touches them with. In him they encounter something that is beyond the everyday, something God-like, something that fills them and feeds them. No wonder they won't let go!

Can you imagine? Do you recognise that feeling of yearning, of longing for God knows what? Can you imagine what it means to find Jesus there, feeding and nurturing with abundance, providing for every person according to their needs? What better propaganda can the gospel provide than to give this message on every level – that this is what it is like when Jesus is around. Even when the inner circle of his disciples is tired and grumpy, like every normal human being would be, Jesus still manages to give people what they need and feed a multitude. If you happen to be one of those who are more knowledgeable about

the scriptures you'll notice it is not just bread and fish he is feeding them either. Five loaves represent the five books of Moses, the two fishes, bearing the acronym of who Christ is in their name – Jesus Christ, Son of God. Telling the listener there are two things that will feed and nurture your life: the scriptures of old and, twice over, Jesus Christ, Son of God. Together they are enough to fill your life with direction and meaning every one of the seven days of the week. See how the gospel plays around with its audiences? Those who are still on the fringes of the Christian community get the message that where Jesus is around people will be attended to. That he will be there for them, never too tired, never otherwise occupied. One level in and the message deepens, saying that it is not just any food, spiritual or otherwise, but that this food comes from two distinct sources: the law of Moses and Jesus the Christ. Another level in and we find the disciples called upon to trust that if they hand out what Jesus has given them there will be enough. Even where they may not see or believe it, be tired and grumpy or fed up with the crowd. That there will be more than enough to go around even when it is getting dark, in a deserted place with nothing much to draw from for miles around. Next thing we know the disciples are packed into their boat. With Jesus going up a mountain, traditionally a place where his people have found it easy to connect to God, to pray.

Time off? Sure, but prayer can be hard work, so I wouldn't be too sure of it. Jesus seeks the presence of God, finds a place where the communication with God is not cluttered up by other demands on his time and energy. He doesn't even want his inner circle followers around. He needs to be alone. Shouldn't he have taken the disciples with him? Wasn't this a wonderful teaching opportunity for them to learn how to come to the silence, how to enter into God's presence and be intimate with God? No, there are times when even privacy is necessary, solitary time with God that is not shared with others. Listening for the voice that will feed him, heal him and support him so he will be ready for the next day, the next challenge, the next group of people that will cross his path. Listening to the story it is made clear to us that intimacy with God is crucial in Jesus' life and ministry, connecting him with Moses and the prophets of old, as well as telling those who come after him that prayer is essential to a life that wants to be lived like his.

The disciples in the meantime are having a difficult time of it. Their boat trip is turning into a hard slog against the elements. You may recognise the feeling. Wind and tide turning against us and changing a pleasant cruise into a battle with the elements. They are straining at the oars as they feel a presence passing. A ghost? We may recognise that too. Straining against the elements, battling along we may feel there is something, somewhere. And we reach out, cry out, looking for support, scared that it may only be a figment of our imagination, this feeling that God is near and finding him alongside us as we try to negotiate the bad weather. Jesus walks effortlessly across the water and joins them while stilling the storm that is tossing them around. Level one: God is near, wherever you are, whatever challenges you are facing, in Christ God's presence will be with you to support you. Even if you may have sensed a distance for a while. Level two: The sea in scripture is the image of death. It's the put one foot wrong and you'll never surface again kind of place. The story tells us that for Christ that place is nothing but a stroll in the park, easily crossed to be with his friends and help them find their way to the other side. Once again they come to shore (and I could give a whole series of sermons on the back and forth that is happening here in the gospel of Mark, it has everything to do with Easter, and our journey through life and death). And once again there is a crowd. This time they are in Gennesaret, outside the boundaries of Israel, an area inhabited by gentiles. In Jesus God is present to people there too, healing and teaching. They try to touch the hem of his cloak. Doesn't that sound familiar? Remember the woman we read about a couple of weeks ago? And the tassels we spoke about then, that would have been attached to that

hem? Touching the hem of a Jewish man's cloak is touching the reminder of what guides a faithful life, the Torah. Touching the cloak of Jesus' cloak brings his teachings and the Torah together once again.

Here in gentile territory where people get healed by touching the hem of Jesus' cloak, they not only touch him, they get "in touch" with his roots. So to you who are still new to this faith – that's what you'll be aiming for. A life guided by both the Torah and the teachings of Christ. And for those of you who have already committed to follow him, don't forget that Christ's healing presence comes with the tassels of the law of Moses attached to it.

Have you realised there is no talk of Church here, of community building, of fixed places for worship and gathering? Have you noticed Jesus is on the move, all the time, meeting people along the way that happen to cross his path? That there is little strategy or planning going on? Just his presence drawing people in like bees to honey? God at work roams around in the wilderness, walks the streets of towns and villages, makes his presence felt in the market place and comes close to those who are struggling against the tide, anywhere, any time. Here is another, final lesson for us, who can be so attached to our places of worship, our liturgical forms and formulas, and our way of doing things. Who can be so stayed in our expectations of where we may encounter or experience God. In the life of Jesus of Nazareth there was no Church, no liturgy, no formulas, no tradition. Sure enough, he went to Synagogue, but this doesn't figure greatly in the gospels as a positive place of inspiration and encouragement. On the contrary, it's where Jesus gets into conflict again and again with the leadership of the religious institutions of his day. What we see in Jesus' life is an endless variety of places, of approaches, of ways of connecting with the world and the people around it. Most if not all seems to be made up as he goes, doing, teaching, healing where and what seems to be needed wherever he is, whoever he meets, whatever stage of discipleship or attachment they happen to be at. He is free to let God be at work in and through his life because he refuses to be confined by the past, by convention, by tradition. Tumultuous, exhausting, active, ministry rooted in the guidance of scripture and connected to God in an intimate, personal, relationship through prayer. For those who want to follow in his footsteps it is important to remember that.

We, who can be so dangerously attached to our buildings, our traditions, our forms and formulas, sometimes tend to forget that they are nothing but vehicles to help us live closer with God, and be better disciples, better followers of Christ. And that sometimes these places are not where the presence of God, intimacy with God, will necessarily be experienced, or nurture found, or healing received. Scripture tells us God is not to be confined to our buildings, our structures, our liturgical forms and formulas, but that God is everywhere. Popping up whenever and wherever people reach out with longing in their hearts, wanting to touch even the smallest sliver of his cloak. Making his presence felt in, for and by people in many different and often unexpected ways. Amen.