

The Rhythm of Life

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Our journey through Matthew continues with further details of the activities of Jesus. Last week we heard about the miraculous feeding of five thousand men (as well as women and children). The question is what next? Jesus sends his disciples on ahead with the task of preparing for the next stop, while Jesus took time to pray. Jesus is frequently found pausing a busy schedule in order to spend time with his Father.

If this is the pattern of our Lord, then it ought to say something to us as to how we labour as Christian workers. Of course, we have some clergy who are lazy and that is a concern as they often neglect the flock, but of equal concern are clergy who put the energiser bunny to shame. There is a high danger that they will burn out and no longer be effective for the Lord. When Jesus spoke to Judas saying, “the poor will always be there”, it is the recognition, that no matter what it is we do and how much we do, we can always find something else needing to be done. The great challenge in Christian activities is to identify priorities (especially with prayer) and trust that God has other plans for the rest.

One of the problems with Christian workers is that they can be trapped into thinking that they are the only ones that can do and as such neither delegate or rest. Personally, it is not that I don't notice the things that need to be done, but having identified ministry or mission possibilities, I keep a mental list, actively looking for others who could step up. I have a knowledge of my limitations and although I am willing to step out in faith, in some cases it is better to find someone else for the job. For example – most ministry units or congregations I deal with could desperately use a programme for primary aged children. I have been doing that sort of thing for forty years, but those years have caught up. I can no longer safely get down onto the floor and get up again. But I can train others who can. So wisdom in ministry is about making choices. But making wise choices is about listening to God and so ministry needs the spaces as well as the activity.

Now I am not talking about the concept of the minister's day off here. There is great wisdom in the Sabbath principle. There is something about the body that needs a break – I remember from when I worked at Temco, every now and then, circumstances would arise that meant we worked over the weekend. Something like a stocktake would see us work our Monday to Friday as normal and then Saturday and Sunday and then back for the next week with another Monday to Friday. Most of us found that about the tenth day, it caught up with us. Humanity is made for the rhythm of six days followed by a day off.

In as much that the Sabbath provides a refreshment for Body and Soul, there is a need also to organise additional 'God' time. In the Anglican system morning and evening offices not only provide an essential rhythm to life, but a regular connection with the Father. But there needs to be more – deliberately stepping out of the world into God space.

This practice has been integral to the practice of faith throughout history. The concept of a retreat is not new - spending extended time with God under the guidance of a spiritual person. But they have lost popularity in recent years. People are not willing to commit the time any more so four- or five-day retreats are replaced with a Quiet Day. Or changing it into a 'conference'. It is almost as if we fear spending time in the silence. The richness of the Anglican and Catholic tradition can not only provide the opportunity for input from God, but always break the perpetual need to do and allow time to be. But this is probably once or maybe twice a year.

Regular Sojourns with God are called for. Jesus shows us the way. With most Christian activity there is a pattern of praying before we do something. But notice – Jesus prays after the event. Having given so much, he returns to his Father for restoration. I guess that contained within will be a sense of reflection and review, but this is mostly about recouping the strength to go on.

As I write this, I am conscious that this is a lesson for me as well. It is so easy after a busy day to tune out and flop down in front of the telly and turn of the mind. Jesus is pointing us to look for restoration through the Father to be ready to go on. It is not wrong to busy, but in a society which emphasises the doing, we are called to rediscover the being. Take time to think about the last few years – Have you found this special time with God? This is not just the province for the ordained. All Christians are called to this Spiritual Discipline. Let us not regret the failings of the past but make a commitment to prioritise this into the future. This will make us open to become the people God wishes us to be.

AMEN.