

A Solitary Place

'Most days I can't decide if I need a coffee, a hug, 6 shots of vodka or two weeks sleep'.

Ring true with anyone?

Let's face it, lots of us are tired. Tired of the restrictions, tired of the isolation; tired of boredom and disappointments; tired perhaps of working stupid hours; or of pretending everything's OK; tired of carrying the weight the world; tired of being tired.

Most of us if we're honest could do with a six-month holiday, ideally twice a year.

So, what are you tired of? Take a moment to think about that.

I take comfort in the fact that Jesus got tired; tired of the constant crowds clawing for his attention; tired of managing the expectations of others; tired of being misunderstood; just tired.

And so, time and time again we're told, he takes himself off to a solitary place to recalibrate, re-charge; to re-commune with the source of his energy; with the Love that sustained him.

In this episode we read about today we find that just before Jesus retreats, he experienced first the painful rejection of the synagogue he grew up in, and then he hears the devastating news of the murder of his cousin John. And so understandably, he takes himself off to grieve and process and pray. But somehow the crowds get word of where he is and they come in their thousands bringing their hopes and their needs and their sick.

Now if that had been me, I'd have been angry; don't you lot understand boundaries? Can't you see I've got nothing to give? But Jesus doesn't do that, we're told that when he sees the crowds, he has compassion.

That word 'compassion' literally means 'to suffer with', to feel what someone else is feeling, to carry what someone else carries. And there's always a cost of course to giving a damn. It drains us. That's why it's so easy to burn out, to get compassion fatigue. Sometimes the suffering of others is just too big; sometimes it's just easier to turn away, turn off the news, tune out.

I believe where compassion is, God is. Jesus as a fully paid up member of the human race did not have built-in superhuman levels of compassion. His compassion always came from the same place ours does; its source is God. And he had to, time and time again, withdraw to recharge in order to re-engage. He had to make space to sit with his Father and allow himself to receive again the kindness and love that fuels compassion.

And what's good for Jesus always is good for us. We too need daily to withdraw so that we can catch our breath, own our tiredness, accept that it's OK not always to be OK, and to offload with whatever words or silence or virtual wall punches we need.

And when we've let go, well then, we then just need to sit, to have the permission to rest awhile; to allow God's kindness and love to rise up from the reservoirs within.

And actually, the best way I've found of doing that is to just breathe.

So, if it's Ok with you, I'd like to invite you just for a moment to breathe.

Imagine that as you breathe in, you are breathing in kindness (to yourself for starters, you can't be kind to others until you're kind to yourself) and you're breathing out any frustration.

Imagine that you're breathing in reassurance; and breathing out restlessness.

Imagine you're breathing in compassion, and breathe out apathy, and any self-centeredness.

Just for a moment, come away and breathe...

Having caught our breathe, although the things we will walk back into won't necessarily have changed, we will. Time spent breathing in that solitary place will bring a new energy and a new perspective and God-willing, a renewed compassion towards ourselves and towards others.

Confession time. For me, whole weeks or months can pass where I forget to withdraw. And all that time I waste in looking down and looking in, and all the while the burdens and the tiredness and the apathy grows.

We are asked to come away from that crowd of 5000 plus stresses, that drain us and compete for our attention, to withdraw to that solitary place, where like the boy in the story, we simply bring our scarcity; our meagre five rolls and two fish, and we hand them over to grace, to Christ who takes them and multiplies them, so that there isn't just enough for us to keep going, there's more than enough; there's compassion to share.

When we withdraw to our solitary place to breath, to commune, to pray, then we begin to see with God's eyes, and to feel what God feels.

For some of us, that solitary place will be the quiet room of our own thoughts. For others our solitary place will be the great outdoors, where we can reconnect through beauty and the rhythms of nature.

Last week, Rachel shared with me a YouTube video by a guy called John Pavolitz entitled 'An open letter to those who still give a damn'. And in it, he outlines different strategies for sustaining ourselves in the long haul of compassion. There, he talks about the importance of withdrawing to our own solitary place to recharge. He also talks about the importance of community, of having our own tribe or support network who can help share the load, to take the weight when we're exhausted. He speaks of the medicinal properties of humour which can diffuse and right size the stress and tiredness we feel. He recommends tapping into our creativity, allowing that channel, whatever it is, to reconnect and feed the soul.

And he talks about that spiritual discipline of cultivating gratitude, of intentionally each day looking for reasons to be thankful. This, he says, places us firmly in the present. So much of our lives are spent elsewhere, reviewing the past, preparing for the future. Gratitude causes us to look at what we already have... to help us see the enough of now.

John Pavolitz also talks about creating a Hope inventory. Hope is what gets us up in the morning, what gives us something to live for. And yet it's in short supply. It's so easy to lose hope when we look at the scale of suffering and injustice. It can overwhelm. It can cause us to withdraw and bunker down. John P says if the big picture is overwhelming, then look at the small; the local. Look around you for signs of hope, for acts of kindness that restore our faith, for little moments when

love and goodness win. And deposit these things in your hope inventory, for those days especially when despair threatens to capsize us. Jan Richardson, in one of her blessings, talks about 'stubborn hope'. Hope stubbornly holds on to the promise that in the end, everything will be OK, God will work everything for good. And if it isn't, or He doesn't, well then it's not the end.

When those 5000 plus folk brought to Jesus their hopes and their needs and their sick. Jesus had compassion. And he recognized that as well as their hopes and their needs and their sick, they were also hungry, not just physically but hungry for what only he could give.

What are you hungry for?

Take a moment to think about that...

Let me pray for us

We come Lord tired and hungry asking for the living water and the bread of life; asking that in moment, this solitary place, we may know your compassion rising from within, that we might become conduits of that same 'suffering with', that same love into action. Amen