

[Mark 6:30-34, 53-56](#)

Last weekend I finished three and a half months as the Acting Superintendent of my Methodist circuit. Our actual Superintendent was on sabbatical, and as the next most senior minister I stepped up.

Mostly I didn't find it a daunting issue, because as a longstanding minister I had plenty of experience to draw on. What I did find harder was that I had to do this on top of my existing responsibilities, rather than simply as part of them. By the time I finished a week ago you can imagine I was ready for a rest.

But did I get one? No. My first week back as an 'ordinary' minister (if I dare describe it like that) brought me a major safeguarding problem and the death of a church member among other things. Both situations were urgent, time-consuming priorities.

I don't suppose it will surprise you, therefore, if I say that I identify with Jesus inviting his apostles to come aside to a quiet place for some rest, because the demands of people on their time were such that they didn't even have time to eat (verse 31).

And I feel for them even more, because of what happens next. Even when they have sailed to a solitary place, crowds see them and flock to them (verse 33).

Not only that, when they later land at Gennesaret, something similar happens, as crowds beg Jesus to heal their loved ones (verses 54-56).

This overload and stress isn't unique to Jesus and the apostles, or to ministers of religion. It's a common feature of life, experienced by many. The other week at Wimbledon, the eighteen-year-old British tennis player Emma Raducanu [had to retire from her match due to breathing difficulties](#) that were [later attributed to stress](#).

And as companies try to cut costs to survive the economic impact of COVID-19, so there will be fewer workers, but still expected to deliver the same output that the larger workforce used to manage.

We know that some stress is good, but that over-stress isn't. An elastic band needs stress on it to work, but pull it too far and over-stress breaks it. So with human beings, too. A certain amount of stress stretches our faith and our willingness to work, but too much damages us.

So **firstly**, let's think about the importance of **rest**.

The first of our two episodes puzzled me for many years. Here we have Jesus telling his apostles, who have just come back from a busy mission trip, to get some rest, but as soon as the crowds find them, Jesus springs into action. So much for rest, I used to think. Does Jesus drive himself and the apostles into the ground by this action?

But then I thought more about the context. Because there's no evidence that Jesus has been busy just before the incident, only the apostles. And when the crowd comes, it's Jesus who ministers to them, not the apostles.

For us, the call to rest is not only the call to physical rest, and I say that as someone who has become notoriously bad at getting a good night's sleep, but it's also about resting spiritually in Christ. It's about being recharged for what is to come through our relationship with God.

I'm not talking about the sort of prayer that is intense and is like wrestling with God for big things, as can happen when we engage in intercession. I'm talking about prayer as relationship.

Right now I have the privilege of reading an advance copy of a new book on prayer. It's called 'Seven Ways To Pray' by Amy Boucher Pye. In the Foreword, another author named Sharon Garlough Brown says this:

On the wall in our kitchen hangs a chalkboard with these words in my handwriting: 'Prayer is about being deeply loved.'¹

And as Amy herself goes on to write a few pages later,`

I'm reminded of the interview of US newscaster Dan Rather with Mother Teresa, when he asked her what she said during her prayers. She responded, 'I listen.'

Rather asked, 'What does God say to you?'

She said, 'He listens.'²

Just as it can be restorative simply to sit quietly with a beloved family member or our spouse, so something similar is possible in prayer. We don't need an elaborate technique. We don't need a shopping list of requests. Prayer can be as simple as quietly stopping and being loved by God. That sort of rest alongside physical rest can give us peace and new strength to face the demands of life.

Have you thought of carving out some time just to sit quietly with God? Is there a particular time of day or time in the week you could dedicate to that? Might there also be a particular place where you can go to do this, whether it's a room in your home or another location – even a park bench? Make your own holy place for quiet resting and restorative prayer with God.

And when you can take these breaks – be they for prayer, a holiday, or a sabbatical, like my Superintendent – you become a healthier person. No longer are you someone who needs to be needed and does things because you're desperate to be liked³, instead you respond out of that relationship with God in which you know just how much you are loved by him.

So here we're going on to the **second** of the two things I want to share today, and it's about **response**, because a healthy response to the pressures and demands that life brings us is one that flows from that knowledge of being dearly loved by God in Christ.

Here's how we see it in the reading. Jesus, knowing how much he is loved by the Father, responds with 'compassion' to the large crowd, 'because they were like sheep without a shepherd.' And the nature of his response is that 'he began teaching them many things' (verse 34).

How does that make sense? Sheep without a shepherd need feeding. What does the disciple of Christ feed on? The word of God. So Jesus teaches them. And he can teach them, not just because he is the Son of God, but because he has been in communion with his Father.

This is why those of us who are called to preach and teach the Gospel must not only study the Scriptures, we must maintain a prayerful relationship with God where we rest in him. When you pray for preachers, don't just pray for their studying, pray for their relationship with God in Christ.

That same compassion is at work too in the second of our two episodes, where crowds bring Jesus many sick people. This time we see his compassion in his works of healing (verses 55-56). He doesn't act out of obligation, because it's in his job description, or out of a need to fulfil people's expectations. He has compassion. And that's only natural to have when you've spent time with the heavenly Father who loves you so much.

We may or may not have a healing ministry like Jesus, but we will come across people in all sorts of need and may wonder how to respond. Some of that may

include a certain amount of overload, given that our modern communications tools make us aware of so many needs in the world.

But if we are prepared by resting in Christ, then we will have the strength to be compassionate for those people Jesus wants us to love in his name.

So what about it, then? The resting and the responding are joined. A prayerful resting in Christ is never meant to be an escape for the world. It's fuel in the tank for the journey.

Do you need some time with Christ so that you are ready for where he wants you to show his love to others?

The truth is, we all do.

¹ Sharon Garlough Brown in Amy Boucher Pye, *Seven Ways To Pray*, p xiii

² *Op. cit.*, p 4.

³ See Carey Nieuwhof, [5 Signs You're A Leader Who Needs To Be Needed \(Why You Never Get A Break\)](#)