



Come Away to some Lonely Place and Rest a While (Mk6:31)

FR EUGENE VAZ

Spiritual Director for Christian Meditation Groups,
Archdiocese of Singapore

Group Leaders Meeting, 22 July 2018

Good afternoon Fr Stanley; good of you to be here. Fr Stanley is our parish chaplain for the meditation groups at Holy Family, so we share the work among ourselves and it's nice for Fr Stanley to be here. Thank you, Fr Stanley. And it's nice of you, my dear friends, to be here; I'm happy to be with you on the day when the Word of God that is spoken to us, particularly the gospel passage of today's mass (Mk 6:30-34), makes a lot of sense to people like you and me who are rooted in Christian meditation.

What I'd like to do now for a few minutes is to open up this gospel passage based on Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd. I want to spend some time on this invitation of Jesus to his disciples:

*Come away to some lonely place
and rest a while.* (Mk 6:31)

In the scriptures, particularly the gospels, to go away to a lonely place is actually to put oneself within the environment of learning – learning Jesus, learning what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, what it means to grow in Jesus. A lonely place in the scriptures is usually an environment of Jesus teaching his disciples what it means to be kingdom builders. As he established the kingdom of God among us, he invited people to come follow him, to come get involved with that work of building up God's rule, God's reign in the world. And that's the context actually of today's gospel.

These people, whom Jesus had called earlier in Mark's gospel, he formed them into a community. We see that in Mark chapter 3. This community that he formed, the new church, he sent on mission in chapter 6. So this is a very beautiful little sequence that's interesting for people like you and me in Christian meditation, that we recognise that we are called by Jesus to follow him. At

different times in his ministry, he would tell someone: Come follow me; come follow me; come follow me. Individual people got up, left everything, and followed him.

Our own experience when we meditate is to go back to that moment of our own experience of God, Jesus, calling us. In our own way, each of us has his own story. We would have heard Jesus saying 'come follow me', and we went. And we realised that actually Jesus is not calling us into individualism, into insulation or isolation; he is inviting us to come follow him within a community. We get incorporated into the community and we very quickly come to realise that this community is not just a group of people in a social club or something like that, but a group of people listening to Jesus sending us on a mission, which is what our life is all about. Continuously, every day, as we live, we are involved in that work of Jesus. We see it in Mark chapter 6; Jesus is sending his disciples to become apostles in the gospel we read last Sunday (Mk 6:7-13) – the call to apostleship. An apostle is somebody who is sent by Jesus.

Today, in the gospel passage, we pick up from where we left off last Sunday. Last Sunday we heard Jesus sending his disciples; and they went. And they did all kinds of wonderful things because they were continuously conscious that whatever they were doing was really his work. What they were doing was to spread his Word, to spread his message, to spread his spirit, to spread his attitude and disposition. So they went.

Last Sunday's gospel told us they did wonderful things. Basically, they were proclaiming repentance, urging people to make the necessary changes in their life so that they would be able to live lives that were really based on the wonderful way of God that he made

known to the whole world in his Son Jesus Christ. They invited people to change, to come back to God; and because of that, they were able to do some healing work, not just physical healing but spiritual healing. We were told last Sunday they anointed many people with oil, which is actually a sign of empowerment, to empower them to be themselves witnesses of Jesus. Many people were touched by that work, by the ministry of the apostles whom Jesus sent.

These people, in today's gospel we are told, *come back* to Jesus. I think that is a wonderful way of looking at Christian meditation. It's not just a moment – 15, 20 minutes, or longer – it's not just a moment of quiet; it's not just a moment of mental blankness; it's not in itself also just a moment of stillness. All these elements are there; it's beautiful to have these elements because every day, every time we meditate, we are coming back to Jesus, like the apostles. And what are they doing? We are told by Mark they told him all they had done and taught. They have a moment of reviewing their work in Jesus and with Jesus.

And Jesus is happy, we are told in today's gospel, that these people come back to him. And that's important for meditation in the Christian tradition. Meditation is a coming back, continuous coming back to Jesus. We need to report to Jesus because we also need to continue learning from Jesus. Every time we report, Jesus is accepting what we have been doing; he helps us to reflect whether that can be deepened in his wonderful way, in his wonderful spirit. And so our life becomes more and more meaningful as Christian disciples.

So Jesus acknowledges their work, and he says you must 'come away to some lonely place all by yourselves and rest for a while'. Actually the sequence is very important. Scripture commentators tell us that this approach of Jesus was to do with methodology in Christian work, that while we are rooted in Jesus and while we have faith in Jesus, we can never do without being one with him all the time. And I think for Christian meditators like you and me, this is the gift that God has

given us. What a beautiful way of describing meditation – not thinking of nothing but just being with the Lord all by yourselves and resting for a while.

And then we are told the context of this, which is also to me very interesting for Christian meditators like us. Mark says, 'for there were so many coming and going that the apostles had no time even to eat' (Mk 6:31). So they were busy people like you and me, and Jesus is addressing that busyness. We don't have time to eat material food; we don't have to eat spiritual food. Eating is important, for the material life as well as for the spiritual life. So he seems to be bringing us back into the Eucharist that is the 'eating' that people need but they have no time for. They had no time to have that communion with Jesus. They had no time to enjoy what Jesus would later in his ministry initiate – the Holy Eucharist – that time of being together to eat, to hear his Word, to reflect upon it and to be renewed every time at the end of that eating with the words, 'Go; you are sent forth. Glorify the Lord by your life.'

And the consequence of eating is mission. Christian meditation is an experience of participating in a meal. It is eating up that Word of God. It is letting that Word digest in us. It is a moment of getting deeper into oneness with Jesus. That is the invitation.

Now this makes a lot of sense as Mark continues with the description in today's Gospel. Immediately as these disciples and apostles go away with Jesus to be by themselves with him in some lonely place, we are told that 'people saw them'. Somehow, our life has an impact on people. People notice us. People see us. And that is why Christian meditation to me is very important because more and more it makes our life to be shaped in that way of Jesus, and people are impacted by that life of ours that is being shaped more and more like Jesus. And there seems to have been a kind of familiarity, because Mark says something very interesting: 'The people saw them going and many could guess where.' (Mk 6:33) So this was not some one-off thing. This must have been the regular practice of Jesus, continuously



sending these people on mission, continuously welcoming them back, happy that they were coming back to him. And it looks like many times he would say 'come let us go to a lonely place'. He invited them into a condition and situation of quiet, of meditation, of reflection, of learning from his teaching. And all this happens to you and me every time we meditate.

Mark now gives us the teaching that Jesus gave to these people – he sets the example so that they might follow. In the same way, you and I when we meditate we are open to the example of Jesus so that in our own quiet time, in our own focus, in our own stillness, in our whole contemplation of him, we may see what he is doing and then we can be like him. What does he do? He steps ashore.

We are told the consequence of Jesus' own inner life, the consequence of Jesus' own relationship with God, his Father, because Jesus himself was a man of quiet, of prayerfulness, of meditation. Many times in the Gospel, we are told that Jesus would slip away from everybody and he would go to some quiet place. And his own closeness with God his Father, his own intimacy with God, coming out of his own readiness to spend time with God, what you and I do in meditation, that made Jesus aware of people. So it's something for you and me to think about also: through our meditation, through our contemplation, through our focusing on Jesus, are we becoming more attentive to people?

We are told that as soon he stepped ashore, he *saw* – a very powerful verb. God sees. God is continuously seeing and therefore God is continuously responding. The most classic way he responds, is Jesus. He sent Jesus because he saw what was the condition of the world. He saw the need in this world and he sent Jesus. And today, he sees and he sends you and me to follow the example of his Son. He saw; he saw a large crowd. That attentiveness that comes out of a deep oneness with God, that attention to people, that awareness of people, that recognition of people, that acceptance of people, all this was Jesus. And the disciples in this quiet place are watching, they are learning. They are all by themselves, remember? It is a time of soaking in the dimensions of their master, Jesus. They realise this man is attentive to people. So that is the first thing: he saw.

The second verb that Mark brings out – in the sequence of his seeing, he *took pity* (Mk 6:34) on them. Jesus had an empathy for people because he was

continuously meditating on God, his Father. And God his Father never for half a minute or second, would not feel for his people, and Jesus could not but be like his Father. He took pity on them. And that my dear sisters and brothers is also a question that comes to you and me, because we have been practising meditation some of us for many years, some of us may be newer in this and still struggling along, but persevering – very beautiful. Don't give up; you will get deeper into Jesus. That is his assurance: 'Be still and know that I am God.' (Ps 46:10) So you will know. Your knowledge will increase but not in the head but from deep within you – the knowledge of him that can give you the same kind of heart and mind and spirit of Jesus to feel for people, to have that empathy for people.

Then Mark continues – he 'saw', he 'took pity' and he went to the root of the problem. Very often we come across a problem, a difficulty, a need, or a very awkward situation of some kind, and at once we want to solve the problem. But Jesus, no! He *feels* for these people. Mark uses that word 'pity'. It is a whole way of being in total empathy with the people, in that whole condition of the people, that drives Jesus to find out first of all what is the root cause of their problem. And Jesus discovered the root: 'they were like sheep without a shepherd' (Mk 6:34). That was their problem; that was their need; that was their situation. Lovely people, daring to go and raring to go and do something, but no proper shepherd. Nobody to lead them, to guide them, to tell them the truth, to open their minds, to encourage them, to support them, to accompany them. They were lost.

Having found the root. Coming to the point of what was really their need, Mark tells us, Jesus took action. 'He set himself to teach them at some length.' (Mk 6:34) He became their shepherd. He said, I on behalf of my Father will lead these people back to their very own lives and then their lives to God to whom they owe their lives. He set out to teach them.

And my dear sisters and brothers when you take this whole passage and link it to you and me practising Christian meditation, I think we are invited to be like these apostles, the ones who were sent by Jesus, the ones who did the work, and the ones who continuously were ready to make the reflection on that work so that the work could grow, could deepen, could become more and more meaningful. And so we thank the Lord for giving us this gospel passage. ■