

**Nijmegen/Arnhem, July 21<sup>st</sup> 2024, Trinity 8, year B (Revd Dorienke de Vries)**

**Readings: 2 Sam 7.1-14a; Ps 89.20-37; Eph 2.11-end; Mark 6.30-34, 53-end**

I've had enough. I need some time for myself.

Anyone who interacts with people a lot, either professionally or as a volunteer, will know that feeling: I've had enough. I need some time for myself.

It is the starting point of our gospel story today. The disciples have returned from a successful mission, eager to share their stories. What they have experienced requires a proper debriefing, but time and space for that do not automatically present themselves. There is a constant coming and going of people demanding Jesus' time and attention.

And so Jesus tells them, 'Come on, let's take a break together, that will do you good.' Easier said than done. They are spotted, and when they arrive at the place of their retreat, it is already teeming with people.

We all know that kind of annoyance: just as you happily curl up on the couch with a book or a movie, the phone starts ringing. You have to take a deep breath and deliberately make an effort, so the person who is asking for your attention will not notice your irritation.

However, we don't notice any annoyance in Jesus' response to the crowd that has turned up without invitation. Not because he is a master in hiding his feelings, but because his heart responds differently. It is not the large number of people wanting something from him, that is overwhelming him. What gets to him is their fate, their condition, their misery. They are like sheep without a shepherd. People

who have lost their way; who don't know where to turn to; who have been pushed to the margins; who are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Were there no shepherds in Israel? Where are they? We have to be careful here. Of course, there were wise shepherds among the religious leaders of that time; shepherds with a heart for their flock; priests, leaders of local synagogues, scribes with great pastoral insight. But the religious system as a whole was severely corrupt. The religious elite were exploiting the flock for their own gain and status.

Two examples:

Animals that were offered for sacrifice had to be without blemish, and so the temple authorities would inspect them before the sacrifice could take place. This inspection came with a fee. So far, so good. But animals that had been bought outside the temple were very likely to be rejected, and so anyone who wanted to sacrifice to the Lord was forced to buy their animals on the temple market. And the price there could be as much as 20 times higher than the price outside. No wonder the temple treasury was bursting at the seams.

A second example comes from the Gospel of John. In John 7.49 we hear the shepherds of the people, the religious elite in Jerusalem, talking about the people entrusted to their care. Full of disdain they call them 'the crowd that does not know the law, cursed are they.' They have no compassion, no mercy, no understanding.

Exploitation and contempt. It doesn't do anybody any good. How does that affect your self-esteem? How does it make you feel, when you are being belittled and have no power to resist? Ask the millions living in slavery in our own day and age.

Ask the refugees whose story is not heard. Ask the victims of sexual abuse, silenced to protect the reputations of powerful people and powerful institutions.

And so Jesus finds himself, face to face with that crowd of lost human beings whom nobody cares about. Who are being kept ignorant. Who are being blamed for being sick or poor. Confronted with all that misery, Jesus knows one thing for sure: it is my calling to do something about it. I am the descendant of David that God has promised to send. I am that shepherd-king sent by God to look after his flock and to lead it to abundant life.

But how? Where to begin?

We see him doing two things: teaching and healing.

Jesus teaches the people many things. Education is empowering, we all know that. And if you don't, just ask the women and girls in Afghanistan. It is for a reason that dictators order textbooks to be rewritten. But Jesus gives his audience the right information. He explains the words of God to them. His parables encourage the listeners to use their mind and their imagination. His questions encourage them to think for themselves. In this way he helps them to resist any manipulation, any lie, and all the propaganda of the powerful. He hands them the tools that allow them to say No to everything that makes them feel insignificant, everything that denies their human dignity.

And Jesus heals. People come flocking with their diseases, their mental health issues, their traumas, their disabilities. And all who touch him are healed. Jesus helps people back on their feet, sometimes literally. All those who come to him can stand on their own two feet again afterwards. Whatever it was that prevented them from living a fully human life has been removed. People whose disability

forced them to beg can now support themselves and their families. People whose illness made them unclean are now allowed to participate in society. People whose condition made them dependent on others now have agency and control over their lives.

The docile masses, an easy target for exploitation and manipulation by the powers that be, are changed by Jesus into strong, healthy, free human beings whose self-esteem has been restored by God, and who are able to take responsibility for themselves and for others.

Today I'm sending you home with two questions to think about.

Question 1:

Is there something in your own life that keeps you from being fully human? Something that makes you feel small and insignificant? Is there anything you can do to change that, with the help of God and of others people? What would it mean for you to have life in abundance?

Question 2:

Do you know someone who could do with some support on their own journey to healing and freedom? How could you, following the Good Shepherd, be a shepherd to others?

I wish you creativity and wisdom while you are pondering these questions, but above all a heart filled with the compassion of the Good Shepherd.

Amen.