

Sixteenth Week in Ordinary Time
July 19, 2015
Jer 23:1-6; Psalm 23; Eph 2:13-18; Mark 6:30-34

The word translated as “pity” or “compassion” in our Gospel reading today is actually a very weak rendering of the original Greek in which the Gospel of Mark was written. The Greek literally refers to a “churning of the gut.” This rather blunt phrase tells us even more how deeply Jesus feels about us all, and how profoundly he resonates with our cherished needs -- even on the most physical and spiritual levels.

We’ve all experienced that “churning of the gut” in our own lives from time to time. It usually happens when we’re so overcome with sadness or horror that we can hardly maintain our composure: the death of someone close to us that leaves us with a feeling of abandonment; the sight of something so unbearably painful that we have to turn our eyes away; the news of a tragedy so outrageous we become visibly shaken.

While all of us have felt this way, we often forget, or never think about, the reality of Jesus doing the same.

After all, Jesus is the healer, the miracle worker, the teacher, the One who will rise from the dead, the Son of God. How could he comprehend what being human is really all about? In our minds, we still see him as above and beyond these kinds of earthly feelings.

Some people still imagine him dropping out of the sky and pretending to be one of us but not struggling with the actual pain of everyday human life, especially that of the most impoverished and the most needy. This is the old heresy of Docetism that never seems to go away.

And yet Mark makes it as clear as he can that Jesus not only gets it, but walks through the door of our hearts and cries with us, hurts with us, prays with us, listens to us, and allows his gut to “churn” with compassion over us.

Whoever heard of a God like this? Whoever pictured a God that intimate, that personal, that caring?

But that’s exactly the point of it all. Jesus presents a whole new understanding of God: the God who is with us, the God who is for us, the God who is actually living in us. The God who feels and heals. The God who enters into the most secret places in our hearts and tells us that we are loved beyond anything we can possibly imagine. The God who shares Himself, flesh, soul and divinity every time we come to Mass.

To understand how close Jesus wants to be with us and understands all that happens to us, just look at the common, ordinary, everyday needs Jesus speaks of in today’s Gospel reading.

First, he asks his disciples to report on how things are going for them. What have they seen? What have they heard? What have they experienced?

This should convince us that Jesus wants to hear from us. He wants to know what’s going on in our lives. He wants a deep pattern of communication to exist between him and us. Why? Because that’s what friends do.

Second, God wants us to “get away” from it all. He wants us to retreat from the busyness and demands of our daily lives and develop a love for solitude. He wants us to accompany him to a “deserted place” away from all the distractions so that we can

spend some time refreshing our souls through a deeper and more profound experience of prayer.

Third, God wants us to rest. He understands the terrible stresses and hassles of our lives. But the need for adequate rest is important, too. When we rest, we are all the more open to be taught "many things."

In our day and age it seems to be getting harder and harder to find that time of rest and reflection. It seems that the curse and irony of our day is that devices designed to give us more time are taking up all of our time!

I'm old enough to remember when Sunday rest was an important part of our culture. There was no shopping because the stores weren't open.

The world seems to have taken our Sundays and boxed us into this little one hour segment each week so we can attend Mass, and even that time is being infringed upon with the advent of Sunday morning soccer games and swim meets and the like.

Families used to spend more time together because they had the freedom of time to be together. We could keep the Sabbath Holy because we had the time to make it holy.

This may sound like so much nostalgic sentimentalism, but there is something much more important at stake.

To be authentic disciples, we must have time for prayer and reflection. If our lives are hectic and filled with all sorts of activities, this is never going to happen. And correcting the situation isn't going to happen overnight.

We didn't lose our time for prayerful reflection all at once...any more than

Christians have lost their moral authority and religious freedoms. It has been a slow erosion that happened a little bit at a time.

And so, we need to begin the work of taking back all that we have lost a little bit at a time.

Jesus wanted only what was best for his disciples, and that's why he wanted to take them to a place of solitude. It didn't really work out this time around because there were a large number of people who were in need of the Good Shepherd.

Jesus has given us the blueprint for achieving wonderful things in our lives and in our world if we allow ourselves to become a more contemplative and compassionate people, aware of our solidarity with the sufferings of the world. And, strengthened by God's Word, sacraments, and prayer, we can regain the power to bring healing to the many people we encounter every day of our lives.