

**St John's Church, Kingston Park
Sunday Worship, 18th July 2021**

*(If you are worshipping with others, words for all to say together are in **bold type**.)*

Welcome to worship with St John's Church. In our Gospel passage today, we read that Jesus said to his disciples, "Come with me by yourselves to a desolate place and get some rest." So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. (Mark 6: 31-32 NIV) Later on, Desmond Chong leads our reflection on this passage, which also includes one of Jesus' best-known miracles – and we shall be thinking about what it means to be with God and rest.

Prayer

The Lord invites us – invites *you* – to spend this time especially with Him. Let's rest for a moment in the stillness, knowing that Jesus is here. (Silence)

God our Father, as we come to you, we bring with us many thoughts.

We bring the memories of the past week.

Some of us bring joys.

Some of us bring worries.

Some of us bring sorrows.

Whatever we bring, we give it to you, knowing that our hearts are safe in your hand.

Lord, you have given us this time; help us to give ourselves.

Help us to give you our attention, and our love.

We ask you to speak to us today.

May your Spirit work in us, as we seek to worship you,

and to listen to you, and to learn from you.

In Jesus' name, **Amen**.

Song: Cornerstone.

Our first song reminds us that Jesus is the foundation for our faith, and we can rest on God's unchanging grace. (This can be found on YouTube here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icbz0FSM4R0>)

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness
I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But wholly trust in Jesus' Name (REPEAT)

Christ alone...

He is Lord, Lord of all.

Christ alone...

*Christ alone, cornerstone,
Weak made strong in the Saviour's love,
Through the storm, He is Lord,
Lord of all.*

When He shall come with trumpet sound
Oh may I then in Him be found
Dressed in His righteousness alone
Faultless stand before the throne

When darkness seems to hide His face,
I rest on His unchanging grace.
In every high and stormy gale,
My anchor holds within the veil

Christ alone...

(Edward Mote, Eric Liljero, Jonas Myrin, Reuben Morgan & William Batchelder Bradbury)

Psalm 23 (NIV)

¹ The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
² He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
³ he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.
⁴ Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
⁶ Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Bible Reading: Mark 6:30 – 44 (NIV)

³⁰ The apostles gathered round Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. ³¹ Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.'

³² So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. ³³ But many who saw them leaving recognised them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. ³⁴ When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

³⁵ By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. 'This is a remote place,' they said, 'and it's already very late. ³⁶ Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.'

³⁷ But he answered, 'You give them something to eat.'

They said to him, 'That would take more than half a year's wages^[a]! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?'

³⁸ 'How many loaves do you have?' he asked. 'Go and see.'

When they found out, they said, 'Five – and two fish.'

³⁹ Then Jesus told them to make all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. ⁴⁰ So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. ⁴¹ Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. ⁴² They all ate and were satisfied, ⁴³ and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. ⁴⁴ The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

Reflection (Desmond Chong)

Meaning and Practice of Solitude – Jesus' Way (Psalm 23, Mark 6:30-44)

Have you ever practised solitude? It seems to be a silly question for some in view of the long lockdown. Even if you don't practise, you certainly have some images in your mind and know what it involves basically. You go away from your familiar world to a retreat house and stay there most of the time on your own for a few days reading, praying and meditating.

However, solitude is not necessarily equivalent to leaving the crowd, leaving your work in office and closing the door behind you and be alone. In your own room, even in a retreat house, you can still surround yourself with all the modern gadgets constantly tapping away at your smart phone. You can take your work with you into your room. It's indeed not easy to practise solitude in this age of mobile phone and internet. Over the last 16 months there have been periods of long isolation. There were plenty of opportunities to reflect on our faith and relationship with God. I hope we are coming out of the lockdown with a deeper love for God and deeper experience of His love for us.

As the society is opening up, it's more important for us to create opportunity for solitude. Question is how to gain the positive power of solitude? It starts with knowing what solitude really is. The spirit of solitude is not in staying away from people, from daily business or modern gadgets. The spirit of solitude is free from influences from others, influences from work and influences from our own talents and resources.

This is indeed difficult, the world around us press us very hard to adopt their trends and values. It generates expectations on us to drive us onward, to keep us going forward blindly in work and in leisure. But it's done at the expense of our attention to our true need and spiritual health.

The story of Jesus feeding the 5,000 is a familiar story. Today we are looking at it from an angle which might help us learn something about solitude.

The apostles returned to Jesus and told Him all that they had done and taught. Then because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, He said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a desolate place and get some rest." So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.

Verse 31 gives a very helpful definition of solitude. Jesus said to them to come away and rest. Then they went to a desolate place where there is nothing, a place without resources. It's like going to a place where there is no power and no internet. Jesus is teaching them to come away with Him and learn to be with Him and Him alone. But it's almost impossible for them to be alone because people just kept following. It seems that even Jesus failed to give His disciples some solitary time with Him.

But I think He was indeed teaching the disciples and us today how to be truly alone with Him. Solitude is not necessarily away from people or from work. Even when we are alone, we can feel unsettled. Do you have that experience? What is the root problem?

In this passage there are 3 contrasts and from them we can see 3 steps of practising solitude.

1. We see the first contrast in verses 33 & 34. On one side are Jesus and the apostles while the other side is the crowd. Jesus and the apostles have been busy and they need a break from people and from work. They need a place for themselves to rest. But the crowd closely follow them, to use a psychology term; they are physically and psychologically "attached" to Jesus and the apostles. Jesus and the apostles simply cannot be on their own. Who really need to learn solitude? It's not the apostles but the crowd.

What did Jesus see in them? They were like sheep without a shepherd. Sheep need shepherd to lead them to food and safety. If there is no shepherd, they will simply follow the sheep in the front. When one sheep decides to move, the rest of the flock follow, even if it is a bad decision. In 2005, some farmers in eastern Turkey watched in horror that more than 1,500 sheep follow the first one to go over a 15m cliff edge and more than 400 killed.

Is this the herd mentality? This is something happens in human beings. People give their thinking over to others; whoever set the trend, they follow. They rarely stop and think where and what they might end up in. I think what we need is not really alone but to be away from unthinking influence of

others, away from the norm set by the culture. But we are afraid to be rejected, afraid to be different even when God calls us to.

We need to return to God and let Him affirm us and tell us who we are. What did Jesus do when He saw what the crowd was like? He began teaching them many things. There are other things that Jesus can do that the crowd might enjoy. Instead Jesus gives them His Words. This is what is needed in solitude. This is what set people free from unthinking influence. This is what gives people direction in life.

If we want a clearer vision in life; if we want to find peace, simply being alone isn't enough. In the past 16 months we have more time away from others, are we coming out of isolation with a clearer outlook on life and a deeper understanding and experience of God? We have to answer this question ourselves. Jesus gave His words to the people. The Bible instructs us to meditate on God's Word day and night to let the Word transform our whole being. Constantly listen to God's Word in the bible help filtering out noises from God's life saving and affirming voice.

³⁵ By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. "This is a remote place," they said, "and it's already very late. ³⁶ Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat." ³⁷ But he answered, "You give them something to eat."

Don't we have sympathy for the disciples? They were supposed to have a rest after a mission trip; instead they had endured another day of ushering the crowd. Imagine this is Spring Harvest and just 12 ushers! Isn't it too much for Jesus to ask the disciples to them food? Isn't it reasonable to send the people away to get their own food and spare the disciples from the task of mass cooking?

Here is another set of contrast – the contrast between the disciples and Jesus. The disciples reckon there are too many people to cater and they are too tired to serve them. They might want some quiet time; but it's more likely they see these people as a burden. A 13 people mini-retreat is suddenly turned into a 5,000-plus Spring Harvest. The crowd has become a burden.

Jesus' teaching isn't helpful either. In v35 'late' is mentioned twice and the literal meaning is "the time is far passed". It means many hours have been spent. The disciples told Jesus He had taught long enough and they had been working for too long.

What is the contrast that I mentioned earlier? When Jesus saw the crowd, He had compassion on them. This compassion for people grew into a passion for them to know the truth! The passion sustained Jesus to give His time to the people He cares. If anyone should feel tired, it should be Jesus. But He has passion and compassion for people. In contrast, the disciples saw the crowd as a burden and the burden developed into a state of "burn-out".

They want Jesus to stop so they can have a break from work. But for Jesus, His teaching is not work; it's His calling from God; a calling to set people free by truth. It is an others-oriented calling. If you see people blessed by God through you, you sure will have a deep satisfaction. But when it is self-oriented, our service is only a task and will become a burden slowly but surely. I believe that's why Jesus told the disciples to give people something to eat. He gave them a calling. To be more accurate, He reminds them the calling He gave earlier, "Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men."

Have we lost our passion and calling? The long time of just being a Christian in a comfortable environment probably has already reduced our passion for God and for people. The 16 months of lockdown has done further damage, I'm afraid. Jesus calls us to come away with Him to rest. Jesus calls us back to Him to receive our calling afresh. He doesn't call us just to be a believer; He calls us to follow.

3. To feed 5,000+ in that situation is an impossible task. Therefore the disciples replied, "Are you serious? You want us to spend a fortune on food? By the way we don't have that money anyway." The first thing that comes into their minds is the problem of resources. "We don't have that!" They focus on what they don't have, but Jesus focus on what they have. Jesus didn't send them to the villages to get what they can. He asked them to go and see amongst themselves what they had. Jesus doesn't rely on external resources.

When we are given a new task to serve God, how often do we really trust that God will provide? Maybe we don't have confidence or time or indeed both, we turn to reference books, internet or friends with experience but rarely go to God. When I started preaching 33 years ago, I always spent time reading the passage and praying before consulting commentaries. It's always a fruitful time as the message became personal to me first. After years which I forgot how many, sense of insecurity crept in and started to feel my sermons weren't good enough. I turned straight to references after just a brief reading of the passage. What does it mean in effect? It means a lack of trust in God. When I stop trusting in God, I stop seeing His provisions.

Solitary or desolate place is a place without resource. Jesus took the disciples to the desolate place to teach them trusting in Him – the true meaning of solitude. Don't get me wrong, I am not saying we don't need to do anything. I still consult commentaries. Sometimes God even leads me to materials which are exactly what I need. But what matters more is the attitude of trust.

There's something unusual in Jesus' way of handling the food shortage. He could have simply multiplied the 5 loaves and 2 fish dramatically in front of everyone and then invite them to come forward to collect their shares. He didn't. He directed the disciples to have all the people sit down in groups of 100's and 50's. Then He broke the loaves and the fish and gave them to the disciples. Each disciple only has a small portion to further distribute. How would you feel if you were one of the disciples? Looking at the small amount of food in your hand and look up to the big hungry crowd, how is it going to help? But Jesus has blessed the food and given to them.

They stepped out hesitantly, then they saw the miracle – the food kept multiplying. It was still 5 loaves and 2 fish in Jesus' hands; it became more and more in the disciples' hands. The miracle happened when the disciples participated in the work.

With the easing of the lockdown, there is a big challenge facing the church. Many Christians have become lukewarm in faith. Some have got used to staying at home on Sunday morning. Quite a few worry about mixing with others rightly or wrongly. People in the community have all sorts of questions about God and about their suffering. What can we do to draw people to God? How can we preach the Good News effectively and meaningfully and to make disciples for Christ? How can we grow our church into a community of Jesus' daily followers and not just Sunday worshippers?

These are indeed difficult questions. The task is indeed beyond our ability and resource. The first thing is let us once again recognise it is God's work. If we believe it is God's work, we should trust that He will provide for us to accomplish the difficult task. We should entrust ourselves to God knowing He is trustworthy.

Jesus allowed the disciples to face their limitations not for discouraging them. He invited them to walk into His mission and His miracle. He invited the disciples to bring their limited resources and abilities for Him to bless and multiply. He put the transformed resource back into their hands. He is still doing that today. He invites us to taste and see that He is good. He invites us to bring all we have to Him. He invites us to be with Him and to see His work multiplies in our hands. The task is beyond us, but it is His work. Let's turn to Him for wisdom and strength.

Conclusion:

What is solitude? The passage tells us true solitude is receiving God's Word to counter unhelpful influences. True solitude is finding our passion in God and renewing our calling from Him. True solitude is looking to Him for provisions for tasks big and small. Come away with Him! Come to Him!

Prayers

God our Father, you care for us as a good parent cares for their child, as a good shepherd cares for their sheep, but these images scarcely begin to describe the love that you have for us, the care and the goodness that you pour out on us. We thank you that you are always with us. We thank you that you invite us to spend time in your presence, to meet with you and know you, and to share in what you are doing. We thank you that whatever happens in our lives, we do not face it alone.

The Lord is our shepherd.

We trust in Him.

We pray for the nations of the world, knowing that you are the ruler of all. We pray for governments, including our own government, as they deal with the pandemic and other needs, that they will be able to make good decisions for those they serve, and also to do what they can to help those in most need. We pray this week for Afghanistan, and the changing situation there as western troops withdraw. God of peace, bring peace to that land, and to all who suffer as a result of war.

The Lord is our shepherd.

We trust in Him.

We pray for those who struggle with loneliness, and also for those who feel safer when they can be alone. Protect them, Lord, and help them to know the comfort of your presence.

The Lord is our shepherd.

We trust in Him.

As restrictions are to be lifted tomorrow, we pray for places of work, for businesses and public services, and for all whose job brings them into contact with others. We ask for wisdom for those whose job it is to decide how their workplaces will respond to the changes, and wisdom for each of us as we go about our daily activities, so that we may know how best to care for those around us.

The Lord is our shepherd.

We trust in Him.

We pray for churches, especially this church, as we consider how to move forward, and what the next steps are in building up the life of the church, and how to keep each other safe as we do so. Even though we participate in the life of the church in different ways, we pray that you will keep us united in You as one church family,

The Lord is our shepherd.

We trust in Him.

We pray for those who are ill, that you will give them strength and comfort and healing. We pray too for those who are worried about loved ones, and those who are bereaved – give them comfort and strength in their troubles. In a moment of silence, we lift up to you those for whom we are particularly concerned today. (Silence)

The Lord is our shepherd.

We trust in Him.

We draw all our prayers together in the prayer that Jesus taught us.

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.**

Song: Lord, I come to you.

Our final song is a prayer that we may be changed and renewed by God as we live in Him.

(This can be found on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5DERncaM80>)
or you may just wish to use the words as a prayer.

Lord I come to You
Let my heart be changed renewed
Flowing from the grace
That I found in You
And Lord I've come to know
The weaknesses I see in me
Will be stripped away
By the power of Your love

Lord unveil my eyes
Let me see You face to face
The knowledge of Your love
As You live in me
Lord renew my mind
As Your will unfolds in my life
In living every day
By the power of Your love

*Hold me close
Let Your love surround me
Bring me near
Draw me to Your side
And as I wait
I'll rise up like the eagle
And I will soar with You
Your Spirit leads me on
In the power of Your love*

(Geoff Bullock)

Closing prayer.

Lord, as our worship time ends, we know that you are with us always. May we go on in the knowledge of your presence, to live in the peace of Christ and the refreshing power of the Spirit , to bring You glory, and to share your love with all. And may the blessing of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be with us and remain with us always. **Amen.**

Worship prepared by Julie Horton. Reflection by Desmond Chong.

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