



10th Sunday of Pentecost
28th July 2024

What to do, when you hear yourself crying

"Where is Jesus?"

When I saw the reading today, I couldn't help but chuckle over Gordon's 'Church news bulletin joke, he shared last week. Didn't catch it? It was,

*The sermon of the morning is "Jesus walking on the water"
and this evening, "Searching for Jesus."*

Perhaps that is what I should have put in our news bulletin? Why, well because today's Gospel reading takes us right from the amazing miracle of the feeding of the 5000 to when Jesus walks on the water towards the disciples on a dark and stormy night.

Today's Gospel passage, we heard and watched, covers a significant amount of time. If Jesus arrived at the shoreline of the Sea of Tiberias in the morning and taught the crowds which gathered throughout the day, then it was fast approaching evening when Jesus decided to slip away up into the mountains.

I invite you to open the pew Bibles to John chapter 6, page 1518, as we start in verse 1.

"After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, which is the Sea of Tiberias. And a large crowd was following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick."

So, we know the crowds weren't following Jesus just to hear His amazing authoritative teaching. We're told they were following Him because of the signs they saw him doing. There are people who are attracted to the spectacular, or the supernatural, or the strange and unusual. That is what these crowds were predominantly made up of. They weren't there to have their lives changed. They weren't there to give up everything to be Jesus' disciple. They were there for the thrill of seeing an amazing sight.

Something was wrong with their hearts. They were excited by Jesus's signs, and they believed he was a genuine miracle-worker, but something was amiss.

Now, if we jump to the end of the story of the feeding of the five thousand in John 4:15-16, we will see what's wrong.

“When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, ‘This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!’ Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself.”

So, why did Jesus withdraw? Because the enthusiasm these people had for him was not for who He really is. People can have a great enthusiasm for Jesus, but if the Jesus they’re excited about is not the real biblical Jesus, He’ll withdraw from them.

This is so important for us to realise, especially if – as it was for the disciples - the next leg of our journey involves confronting dark and gusty winds, which we may find – as did the disciples – in a fearful place without Jesus!

You see, even if you’re enthusiastic for Jesus, if your passion, zeal or image of Jesus, is not for the real Jesus, then you may find Jesus takes a step back, seemingly withdrawing from you, having headed up into the mountain.

How could I suggest such a thing? Would Jesus really do that? Didn’t He promise never to leave us nor forsake us?

Rather than stepping into those treacherous waters now, let’s proceed on with the story. After all, if we continue reading, we find ourselves back asking these exact questions. We know, by reading this account alongside Mark’s account, Jesus “insisted that his disciples get back into the boat and head across the lake to Bethsaida”. (Mark 6:45)

The disciples were tired, after a full day of ministry. After rowing about 3-4 miles, at about 3 in the morning, Mark tells us they were all “in serious trouble” (Mark 6:48) for the seas were very rough. Keep in mind, this is most likely the same situation as when Peter calls out to Jesus to ask him to step out of the boat and walk towards Him (Matthew 14:21-34)

However, before we step into verse 19, when they see a figure walking on the water, let’s pause and imagine what it would have been like to be on that small fishing boat. The disciples knew Jesus had gone up in the mountain to spend time with God. As John is the only one who shares the reason for Jesus’ sudden withdrawal, it’s possible none of the other disciples knew why Jesus headed up the mountain (John 6:15).

In fact, I’m sure the whole situation confused the heck out of them. After all, wasn’t Jesus the predicted Prophet, and hadn’t He already told them He was the king? Wasn’t this the perfect opportunity to start building an army? This is probably what was filling their minds as they rowed out onto the lake that night.

But they soon found themselves “in serious trouble” fighting violent waves, with Jesus nowhere to be seen. Is this not how we sometimes feel? Do we not also find ourselves striving against strong gales of troubles and burning winds of difficulties? Or to use language from the service of evening prayer, encountering “the changes and chances of our fleeting world”?

It is in fact during times of ‘serious trouble’ when you begin searching for Jesus and His reassuring presence. However, often we are left feeling, ‘has Jesus forgotten about me?’, ‘does He not know that I’m in serious trouble here?’ ‘Where is Jesus?’

I think everyone of us have felt this way. What are we to do at those times? I would hope you would be humble enough to say to someone you trust, “I’m really struggling at the moment and God seems quite absent”.

But who would you share these struggles with? If it were me, I would speak with someone who I know would say “I remember a time when Jesus seemed absent. This is what I did during that season.”

Having been that person who has travelled through seasons when God seems absent, allow me to offer some suggestions:

Firstly, we are encouraged to call out to God and let Him know that He seems far away. We can tell God that our heart is troubled and full of sorrow.

After all, that's what David did, when he prayed,

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest." (Psalm 22:1–2 also see Psalm 69:17; 143:7, Isaiah 64:7).

If David had the guts to include such honest cries of desperation, should we not also?

Second, we should share our struggles with a trusted friend. If we are to be a genuine loving community, we must be honest enough with each other to share when we experience difficult seasons.

As we share our struggles with a fellow brother or sister in Christ, we are encouraged to look to Jesus Christ and remind ourselves of God's unfailing love and faithfulness.

Hebrews 12:2 tells us to, "fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith." We do this by staying connected with Him through regular prayer, reading and meditating on God's word, and staying connected to His family.

Finally, and I might add this is a step we often forget, we should ask the Holy Spirit to reveal if there is any reason for God withdrawing His presence. We need to be humble enough to ask, "have I done anything that caused you Lord Jesus to withdraw?"

We know that sin will always cause God to withdraw from us. We'll learn this in more detail when we journey through the letter of James in September. However, we are exhorted to "Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts you doubleminded." (James 4:8). Are we humble enough to ask, "Lord have I caused you to withdraw?"

Perhaps we can get a clue at what causes Jesus to withdraw, by seeing what made him step away that day. We are told that the people saw that Jesus was the predicted Prophet and the long-expected king of Israel. They are referring to Moses prophecy when He said, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers — it is to him you shall listen." (Deuteronomy 18:15) Although the crowd recognised that Jesus was the predicted Prophet, they didn't understand what it meant.

We see this when we go a little further on, verses we'll look at next week, when Jesus explains to them the real meaning behind His provision of bread in the wilderness. The reason Jesus withdrew from them is because they were not allowing Him to be the Prophet and King God had called Him to be, in the way God intended.

Too often we too try to force Jesus into being a Saviour shaped by our own ideas, and desires. We want him to be the fixer of all our problems; the saviour who will rescue us and make our life more comfortable; the conqueror who will defeat and destroy all our enemies.

Thankfully, Jesus will not be forced nor constrained to remain within any box we attempt to place Him in. So, that leads me to my final point.

Application |

When we feel that God seems absent, we must not ignore the silence. Rather, we are to make intentional steps to draw close to Him, persevering in watching for His presence in ways we may not have perceived before.

For these times when God seems absent are times of testing.

So, as the Apostle James writes, "whenever you face trials of many kinds, consider it pure joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." (James 1:2-4)