

Followers Of The Way

Ancient Discipleship For Modern Christians

Reading: Matthew 14:22-36

“Keep a Rhythm of Prayer, Work & Recreation”

Dave Phillips

Good Morning,

This morning we're continuing with our series looking into what it really means to be disciples of Christ; using as our template for this series, Simon Reed's book, "Followers of the Way", Ancient Discipleship for Modern Christians.

A couple of weeks ago, Tom introduced the series by reminding us that we are all lifelong learners; we're all students of Jesus. To help establish an environment where we're most able to engage with God, we're all encouraged to develop our own individual 'rule of life' which is to establish a routine which makes provision for time spent in quiet contemplation, where our primary focus is to develop a deeper spiritual maturity.

Pippa explained last week how important it is for us to forge strong relationships with people who can be considered, "soul friends"; friends who are able to offer love, friendship, support and prayer whenever we need it.

This week, we'll be looking at what it means to live a healthy balanced life of Christian discipleship by keeping a rhythm of prayer, work and recreation and exactly what this looks like in the reality of a world in which we're forever being encouraged to cram as much activity into every waking hour as is humanly possible. If my nearest and dearest were here listening to me this morning, they'd be staring open-mouthed with a look of incredulity on their faces that would be asking, "How on *earth* can you stand up there and tell people to live a balanced life when the only time you ever stop is when you're afflicted with a health condition!?"

If the charge against me is one of hypocrisy, I'm afraid my defence is very weak. But I am working on it and on a good day at least I'd like to think I am making some progress!

So, let's start by looking at this short passage to see what can be taken from it in the context of contemporary discipleship. The waves were rocking the boat and the wind was against them so much so that they were unable to make headway with their oars. Paddling frantically, they were using up all their energy and yet they were going nowhere.

Ring any bells???

Jesus appears, walking out to them on the water as though he's taking an afternoon stroll! The disciples **knew** Jesus; by now they'd seen so much of his great power; they'd heard his teaching and they'd prayed his prayer and yet, despite this, they were still terrified of this ghostly figure walking out to meet them in their need.

It's a shame how many people in our world know just such a little about Jesus: they might know him as a ghostly, mythical figure detached from reality, completely unrelated to us and to our problems. Even those who believe in him, as the disciples certainly did, don't always know what to expect of him. They certainly wouldn't have expected him to be there in that challenging moment, walking across the water, encouraging them to have more faith in him and giving assurances that he's with them and that everything's going to be alright.

The more we know of Jesus the more he appears to be the kind of chap who we'd like to follow and the more appealing his mode of life appears to be, so there are those who think it would be a good idea to try and copy him: to adopt his values; accept his teaching and follow in his way. We set out with the very best of intentions to bring his love and power, his peace and his hope to a hurting and needy world.

While we're full of faith and our eyes are fixed on Jesus as Peter's were when he left that boat, we can seemingly do the impossible, as Peter did. But then our heads drop; our eyes fall to the waves and we're overwhelmed, as Peter was.

There was Jesus' hand reaching down to hold and support him and his reassuring voice in a gentle rebuke, "You of little faith! Why did you doubt?"

It's so easy for us to fall into the habit of doing too much and allowing ourselves to become overwhelmed isn't it? The constant *noise* of life can *deafen* us to the affirming, reassuring, sustaining and yes, occasionally, rebuking, voice of God.

As the owner of an engineering and retail business for over thirty-five years, I'm fully aware of not only the challenges of taking time out but also the importance of taking time out. I've always found that hurtling through life at an express pace can easily become something of a destructive habit if left unchecked and, I'll admit to my shame, God can so easily be squeezed out.

The psychiatrist Carl Jung once said that, "Hurry is *not* of the Devil; it *is* the Devil!"

You **HAVE** to put the brakes on regularly and the way to do this is by establishing a rule of life which makes provision not only for work, but also for rest, reflection and prayer.

The American pastor and author John Mark Comer says this:

"A rule of life is a schedule and set of practices to order your life around the way of Jesus in community. It is a way to keep from getting sucked into the hurry, busyness, noise, and distraction of regular life. A way to slow down. A way to live into what really matters: what Jesus called abiding."

So back to the passage this morning to see how the King of Kings himself managed **his** time under pressure and what lessons can we learn from his example as we each seek to follow his way. Our reading this morning started at Matthew 14 vs.22, but if we flip back to verse 13, we read that Jesus had just heard the devastating news that his great friend John the Baptist had been beheaded. He tried to withdraw by boat privately to a solitary place but, as was so often the case, the crowds followed him and prevented him from having the time he was seeking for quiet contemplation and prayer. Selflessly, of course, he had compassion on them and attended to their needs, whether it be teaching, healing or as in this case from verse 17, miraculously feeding all five-thousand of them with the five loaves of bread and two fish.

Once the crowd were satisfied and had dispersed Jesus was finally able to escape up onto the mountainside to pray alone. So here we get an idea of two principles that shaped Jesus' ministerial life which we can use as an example to structure our own lives: There was the strong desire, fueled by his love and compassion, to attend to the needs of others, balanced against the need for withdrawal to find solitude for reflection and prayer. The pattern is often repeated elsewhere throughout the Gospels.:

In Mark, chapter 1 verse 32:

"That evening, after sunset, the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons.....Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed"

Luke 5:15-16....."the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed."

Mark 3:7: "Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the lake, and a large crowd from Galilee followed."

...which leads nicely to Mark 6:31-32, where there is a clear and direct instruction from Jesus, which is as relevant for us today as it was for his disciples two-thousand years ago:

"Because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, [Jesus] said to [his disciples], 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.' So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place."

Because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat!

How many of us here this morning have delayed or even skipped lunch altogether because we've not been given the chance to eat it?

I'll never forget, not long after we were married, I thought I'd surprise my wife, Pip, who was, and still is, a nurse at the RUH, by calling in to her ward one Sunday lunchtime after the family service here at All Saints and delighting her with a social visit. I'll never forget the look of surprise, no, '**horror**', as she saw me walk onto the ward smiling serenely, suggesting she might like some time off for a cup of tea.

That was nearly twenty-five years ago and I've never done it since! I was very quickly ushered into a side-room and asked to wait for her to come back. In the room, there were a number of plates on top of filing cabinets, all containing half-eaten meals. My solitude was occasionally interrupted by a flustered nurse barging through the door, looking at me with bewilderment, taking one, maybe two, mouthfuls of food from one of the plates, without sitting down, and then quickly disappearing back out through the door only to return a few minutes later to take a couple more, even colder mouthfuls.

I realised my mistake and was on my way home within twenty minutes, waving rather pathetically to Pip across the ward, with renewed reverence, on my way out!

Jesus knows that life can get hectic. It was certainly no different for him: remember the occasion when he was at home, so crowded with multitudes of people, all desperate to engage with him that someone took the liberty of removing the roof from his house to lower a sick man into the midst so that he could be ministered to!

Now we know that there are medical practitioners here this morning who struggle to escape for a proper lunch break, and there are busy shop workers, or teachers or parents or carers or the countless other people who put the needs of others over and above themselves and work themselves to the point of collapse!

It's into these extreme situations that Jesus invites us to withdraw to a solitary place to spend time with him.....

"Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light"

If we're to accept Jesus' invitation, and why anybody wouldn't is beyond me, we need to make time.

Jesus is calling us to be in a relationship with him. Over the course of this series we're learning how we can each put together a 'rule of life' to structure our lives in such a way so as to enable our relationship with Jesus to develop and flourish.

I quoted John Mark Comer a little earlier on. In his excellent book, "The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry", he gives a very helpful botanic illustration which is to think of our 'rule of life' as a trellis which supports and nourishes our lives with Jesus. He even, rather tenuously, it has to be said, links the word 'rule' with the word 'trellis', as the word 'rule' comes from the Latin word, 'regula', which, those well-versed in the ancient language will tell us means 'a straight piece of wood'.

Gardeners among us this morning know that certain plants, such as a vine, without a trellis to support it, will die. In the same way, without some structure to support our lives with Jesus, facilitating health and growth, our spiritual lives will most likely wither away and we will remain fruitless.

A rule of life is that structure; the routine which promotes abiding in Jesus as the primary focus of one's life, whatever activities are being engaged in at any one time; whether it be at work, rest or play. Everything is done in the deep loving enjoyment and contentment of the Father's company.

There are those here this morning who have this well and truly sorted: Every moment of every blissful day is a moment in his company.

I salute you!

Others, like me, as I said right at the beginning, are working on it!

Others have a notion that it might be worth trying somehow to free up some time to deepen their relationship with Jesus but they don't have a clue where to start!

I'm very much afraid I'm really not the person to ask!!! But, along with the Simon Read book, "**Followers of the Way**" upon which this sermon series is based, and is the subject of this term's home group studies, I can recommend the book I've quoted from once or twice this morning, which is John Mark Comer's, "**The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry**".

Start with small tweaks: maybe get up twenty minutes earlier each day to read the Bible or to pray, or to do both! That short drive to the local shop could potentially be taken on foot, if you're able? I've found that my ten-minute drive to work is so much more beneficial to my spiritual life when it becomes a 35-minute walk through the local wood.

Until recently, I've only ever spoken so incessantly to Jesus with my concerns and my requests, that the poor chap couldn't get a word in edge ways! But now, with my walk, I have time to be quiet and to listen to him. If walking's not for you, I urge you to try and find just a few minutes each day to simply sit and empty your mind and spend some time in his presence. Jesus tells us in Luke 18:1 that we should always pray and not give up.

He'll honour the time we spend with him.

17th century French theologian and philosopher, Blaise Pascal once said that.

"All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone."

So, as we go from here this morning, I'd like to finish with a poem by Grace Naessens, which, I'm sure will be familiar to at least some of you. It's called

"I didn't have time":

I Didn't Have Time

I got up early one morning
And rushed right into the day!
I had so much to accomplish
That I didn't have time to pray.

Problems just tumbled about me,
And heavier came each task.
"Why doesn't God help me?" I wondered.
He answered, "You didn't ask!"

I tried to come into God's presence;
I used all my keys at the lock.
God gently and lovingly chided,
"Why, child, you didn't knock!"

I wanted to see joy and beauty,
But the day toiled on, gray and bleak.
I wondered why God didn't show me.
He said, "But you didn't seek."

I woke up early this morning,
And paused before entering the day.
I had so much to accomplish
That I had to take time to pray!

Loving Father, thank you for your word today. Thank you for your abundant provision. Father help each one of us this morning in our struggle to maintain a healthy balance of prayer, work and recreation. When the storms come, as it did that day for the disciples, may we continue to feel your reassuring presence when we reach out to you to find rest for our souls. Thank you father that your yoke is easy and your burden is light.

Through the power of your Holy Spirit may we each be filled afresh right now with that precious and sustaining truth.

In Jesus' name,

Amen