16th Sunday in O.T. 2021

There is a story about a very single-minded explorer who decided to undertake an expedition through the Amazon jungle. It was tough going, but nevertheless, the first two days went well. But on the third day the local men, who were acting as porters, refused to move. “We can't go on” they said, “We have to let our souls catch up with our bodies!” From time to time, we all experience the need to stop and allow our souls to catch up with our bodies. This is the reason we look forward to the summer, as it provides the opportunity to take a break from the normal daily, and often hectic, routine of life. This year, for most of us, it will probably be a “staycation”! If you are looking forward to such a break, I hope your anticipation will be fulfilled; if you are visiting us here in Belfast, we welcome you, and wish you a most enjoyable visit!

Today’s Gospel passage mentioned that the *“apostles rejoined Jesus”;* earlier, he has sent them out on a mission. Reflecting on our own experience, we can appreciate how the apostles must have felt, because they had returned, only to discover that life around Jesus had become hectic. We are told that *“there were so many coming and going that the apostles had no time even to eat.”* That was why Jesus had decided that it was time for them to get “offside” *“and rest for a while” -* to allow their souls to catch up with their bodies!

Has it ever struck you that it is to allow our souls to catch up with our bodies that we come to Sunday Mass? We are here just to “let go” and to rest in the presence of the Lord – we are not looking for anything other than to be in his company, and, of course, to be in the company of his friends, because the friends of Jesus are our friends too. It is that friendship that makes us a Christian community. How beautiful are those opening words of the Responsorial Psalm, *“The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want. Fresh and green are the pastures where he gives me repose. Near restful waters he leads me, to revive my drooping spirits.”* If only we could memorise those words and hold them in our hearts throughout this week, what a wonderful blessing this Mass would be!

The Gospel passage tells us that when the apostles rejoined Jesus they *“told him all they had done and taught.”* In other words, they shared their experiences – and Jesus listened to them. At Mass, we also engage in such sharing – we open our hearts to Jesus, and in our own words, share that which is uppermost in our lives - and he listens. He looks at us as no one else does; he sees the worries and the burdens we carry; he sees our secret struggles and those memories that gnaw at our conscience; he sees through the image that we create around ourselves; he knows our hopes and our longings. Remember how Jesus looked at Peter when Peter hit rock bottom and betrayed him? Pope Francis says, “How beautiful this gaze of Jesus – how much tenderness is there! Brothers and sisters, let us never lose trust in the mercy and patience of Jesus”! *(Lateran Basilica, 7th April 2013).*

What has been your greatest joy this week? What has caused you desolation? Let us, in the moments of silence, speak to Jesus about our happiness, and our worries – he does listen. Hear again the words of the Psalm; *“If I should walk in the valley of darkness no evil would I fear. You are there with your crook and your staff; with these you give me comfort.”*

There is another aspect of today's Gospel that is important to note: how the desire of Jesus, and that of the apostles, for rest, was thwarted - as Jesus *“stepped ashore a large crowd”* was waiting on him*.* Sometimes, because of a particular situation in life, things just don't work out as we would wish; there are times when, in spite of our own needs, the need of someone else is greater. Every family has its worries and concerns, perhaps a member who is sick, or distressed, or overburdened in one way or another. Jesus looked at the crowd and took *“pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd”*. He was moved with compassion. We, the followers of Jesus, model ourselves on him; that implies that we are to be compassionate towards others; we are to be “Good Shepherds”. Who are you shepherding at this time? Is there someone you are supporting or caring for, or guiding or advising? Perhaps all you can do in the present situation is to pray for that person.

During this Mass, hold that person in your heart, and ask for him or her the Lord’s blessing.

*“Lord Jesus,*

*You are the Good Shepherd!*

*Let us rest in the fold of your love;*

*and those who are lost – search out;*

*those who have strayed - bring back.*

*Those who are wounded in mind and spirit – comfort;*

*those who are sick – cure.*

*Those who are young – watch over*”. **Amen.**