

This is a transcript of the sermon Gareth Rayner-Williams gave at his last sermon on 18th July. We share it with you now as it fits the current mood and is so thought provoking. We will miss his wise counsel.

How are you feeling?

I ask because I wonder if what you feel is what many other people feel right now: caught between emotions of anxiety and well-being; not quite flourishing?

Psychologists, researching the impact of the last year, say that the “dominant emotion of 2021” is that of “languishing.”

And by that they mean a sense of emptiness about our lives; a combination of despondency, aimlessness and joylessness, even.

Apparently, it's a feeling that no amount of sour-dough bread-baking seems to lift! A weary feeling of flatness: the “dulling of delight” and the “dwindling of desire” Is how one writer in the Times has recently put it.

And despite the hope that vaccination has brought, it's still the case that around sixty percent of us report pandemic-related insomnia.

We seem to have lost a sense of balance and rhythm.

We can't get started, and when we do we can't wind down!

We're anxious, sleepless, overstimulated, and bored.

“Languishing” – there we go, there's now a word for it.

“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while”, says Jesus And it's an invitation that seems especially welcome because it offers us a way out of this malaise. An antidote to our inefficient striving, a vaccine for our soul-draining workaholism.

And yet this invitation paints a portrait of Jesus we rarely see.

A Jesus who believes in rest. A saviour who sleeps.

I never really think of Jesus sleeping – except that time he slept on the boat when the storm was “putting the frighteners” up the disciples; but that nap always feels more like a miracle than necessity, to me.

Most of us regard Jesus as a sleepless zealot, striding his way through the Gospels in a frenetic wave of activity to save humanity; burning the candle at both ends.

But that's not quite the Jesus we see in today's Gospel;

This is a Jesus who tends to his own tiredness, and recognises that same need in others. It's a Jesus who pulls the disciples aside, and probes beneath the surface of their busyness, and in doing so, he points a finger at something our culture won't allow us to name: the hunger for space and solitude, for nourishment, rest and recreation.

The Gospel reading describes the return of the disciples from their first ministry tour — and they're on fire with all the healing and teaching they've managed to pull off on their own, for the first time.

They are wired. They're fired up.

Ready for the next task - the crowds are waiting, what's not to stop them heading out again?

But Jesus disagrees.

Where the disciples see a crowd and a tightly packed schedule, Jesus sees a group of people out of balance and rhythm. They want to crack on, he wants them to eat, pray and sleep.

They need to stop.

"Let's go off by ourselves to a quiet place and rest awhile," he says to his disciples as the crowds gather at the edge of the Sea of Galilee.



Eugene Peterson puts it beautifully in his translation, *The Message*: “Come off by yourselves; let’s take a break and get a little rest.” For there was constant coming and going.

They didn’t even have time to eat”.

There’s such wisdom and love in that invitation and one that tells us so much about Jesus and about ourselves.

Jesus - God incarnate - hungers, sleeps and, later in the Gospel, grieves. God is like us. Our God rests.

Of course, this lesson isn’t new; it runs through Scripture from the very beginning.

In Genesis, God rests on the seventh day, and calls the Sabbath holy.

In fact it’s the only thing He calls holy in the whole of creation.

Many have said that one of the most insidious impacts of Covid on our wellbeing has been the blurring of boundaries between home and work.

For some people, ourselves perhaps? and certainly for our sons and daughters, this has meant the transforming of homes into places of work, and the blurring of boundaries around work and rest.

One of my sons seems to be Zooming 24/7, with no clear lines between the screen and the self.

Others have fared much worse: lost income or work, or faced eviction, or have watched loved ones die of Covid.

No wonder we’re languishing. We were not meant to live this way with this level of relentless intensity!

We were meant to “come away”

and today’s Gospel invites us to do just that: to regain the balance between work and play, sleep and wakefulness.

Jesus invites us to unplug and take a break.

So our Gospel for today calls us to be gentle with ourselves and with one another – and to give ourselves time and space in this slow work of recovery:

Boris’ economy may be set to bounce back but people, and family, and churches, are not so resilient.

We need rest. We need time.

We need to come away.

So it is that the Gospel ends with a such a powerful and prophetic image; it’s the sick that are laid in the marketplaces, not goods and services.

Their need for healing takes priority in place of economy, and there they beg to just touch the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

That’s all it takes – a little rest – a re-ordering of priorities, stopping still for long enough to make just the slightest reach towards his presence.

One hymn captures this beautifully and if we were able, we would sing it, but let me end by just reading it to you.

*When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain, Jesus’ touch can call us back to life again,
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:*

Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.