

27/06/04am

No Holidays Sunday!

Luke 9:1-17

Psalm 121

The Doagh Road and the Foundry Lane are never quite the same in July and August! Compared to the rest of the year, they are so quiet at 9.00am and 3.00pm, because there are no children and young people making their way to the various schools.

‘Schools Out’, come Wednesday, and the summer holidays will have arrived for children, teachers, lollypop men and everyone else connected to school life – although I’m not sure that the school ancillary staff will be off just yet!

I’m, fairly sure that the children and young people will be glad to get their holidays – and I would imagine that the Teachers won’t mind either!

Outside my office window will be very quiet compared to all the usual traffic – but then I won’t be in the office after this week either, for I hope to be on my holidays – and I don’t mind saying that I’m also looking forward to them – to getting away from the desk and telephone etc etc.

Not that I don’t love you all! But it’s just nice to have a break from the busyness of the weekly schedule - and I imagine you also feel like that, and look forward to holiday times when they come.

So, at first sight, I’m not really too keen on this week’s title for the service: *No Holidays Sunday* – Who dreamt up that silly title!

This is actually the final title in this series that has also included ‘No Bible Sunday’, ‘No Food Sunday’, ‘No Worry Sunday’, ‘No Collection Sunday’, ‘No Communion Sunday’. Probably none of them have turned out to be just quite what they looked like at first, and hopefully, each of them has helped us to pick out some useful and important Bible teaching. And maybe, ‘*No Holidays Sunday*’ will be the same. As the title suggests, we wouldn’t really want to believe it. And the good news is, that we don’t have to believe it.

For here in the section we read from Luke 9, it tells us about Jesus trying to get a break from the busyness of the crowds for himself and his disciples – a short holiday break, if you like! Luke 9:10 says that *Then he took them with him and they withdrew by themselves to a town called Bethsaida.*

Bethsaida, which was up at the top end of the Sea of Galilee, on the far side of the R. Jordan, and this verse probably means that it was the nearest town to where they went – because later on, the disciples describe it as ‘*a remote place.*’

The picture seems to be that both Jesus and his disciples had been pretty busy for a while, and they were well ready for a break. Luke 9:1-9 tells us that while Jesus himself was constantly in the spotlight of public attention and speculation, where even Herod, the local ruler, wanted to see him - the disciples had been sent out on their own by Jesus – he had sent them out to preach and teach and heal, and, for a while, they had been going from village to village in this work. At the very least the work would have been demanding. They had probably never done this before, and Jesus had told them that as they went around they were to depend on the hospitality of the people they met, so perhaps there were days when they didn’t even know where they would be staying that night. At times the work would have been really difficult because Jesus prepared them for the fact that there would be some villages where they would not be welcomed or wanted. So all in all, this had probably been a tiring a stressful time for the disciples.

When they reported back to Jesus after a while, they were probably ready for a rest and a break. Mark’s version of the same incident puts it like this, *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”.*

So Jesus saw that the disciples were ready for a break – and may he also felt that he could do with one himself. Maybe this

is the closest that we get in the Bible to the mention of anything like holidays!

And, maybe this is a wee bit of encouragement for us – that we can look forward to our holidays with a clear conscience! If Jesus reckoned that he and the disciples needed to get away from it all for a break, then there's hope for us!

Is there not a simple, but important point to be noticed here – that just like Jesus and the disciples, we all need to get a break, an opportunity to relax, to unwind, to get away from the demands and the busyness, a time to recharge the batteries – that it was part of being human for Jesus, and it is part of being human for us – that holidays are another example of the same basic point that tells us that we need the rest that comes through sleep – that we cannot 'burn the candle at both ends! Maybe it really is correct to say that we work better – that we are more efficient and effective, whatever we do – if we have appropriate breaks away from our work at the right times. So I think that, in this section from Luke, we can identify an encouragement to take some time off, time away, time to rest and relax.

This is one of those Bible sections that I have no difficulty taking seriously!

However, we probably also need to take seriously the context in which this reference about Jesus and his disciples taking a break, comes.

It comes against a background of busyness – not least for the disciples, who are the people who are most parallel to us – Jesus suggested the break **because** they had been very busy and active – they were not just there with Jesus 'for the ride'! Like the rest of the crowds, they no doubt found it exciting to be part of buzz that surrounded Jesus wherever he went – but as those who had clearly answered Jesus' call to follow him, they had been given direct responsibilities by Jesus – At the appropriate time, he had sent them out to preach and teach, to

help and heal, themselves – they were put into a situation where their growing trust in Jesus Christ meant putting themselves out a bit for him – giving of themselves, as well as receiving the enormous encouragement and hope which came from being with Jesus.

And this is surely a clear word for us – that trusting in the love and hope of Christ almost always means putting ourselves out a bit in his service – doing something active as a concrete expression of our faith. It's not just about having helpful encouragement and hope – it's also about giving of ourselves.

So as we think about this 'No Holidays' theme, today is a good day to recognise so many people in our church who give of themselves - who 'put themselves out a bit' as part of their Christian faith – often on top of busy and demanding jobs, and at the end of busy and demanding days and weeks – people who see the need and who make themselves available in all sorts of ways in church life, as Christian Service – people who are living out the reality of the church membership phrase about '*giving of our time and our talents for the church's work in the world*' – enthusiastic people who are even going to be doing so in the coming week as the exciting plans and preparations for the Holiday Bible Club swing into action – and how exciting and encouraging it is to hear that there are some 50-60 people involved in helping with the Holiday Bible Club in all sorts of ways.

Sometimes, when we are appealing for people to do this or that in church life, I feel uncomfortable because I'm conscious of those people who are already doing so much, and yet who are very likely to offer themselves for something more. It's just great when new people willingly offer their help. It spreads the load – and that's better for everyone – and it's usually also better for the work.

And so today, as we happily recognise that Jesus tried to make sure that his disciples got a break, we also need to recognise that he gave the people who trusted in him ‘things to do’ - it was part of following him then, and it is still part of following him, now.

It’s great to notice Jesus affirming the rightness of getting a break from the work – but it’s also essential to notice that his calling and his expectation was that all his followers would take their share in the work. Sometimes, the problem is that some people are doing too many things, and having to keep too much going in church life because not everyone is taking their share or doing their bit, or ‘giving of their time and their talents for the church’s work in the world’. As we recognise the rightness of getting a break, it is also right for us to say that in one way there is no such thing as Christian Faith being ‘*a holiday of comfortable hope*’ – Rather, it is ‘*a Calling into active service*’ – just as it was for the first disciples of Jesus, and just as it has been ever since.

2. If the first part of this story in Luke 9 is *affirming*, the other part is *amazing* – maybe even a little bit scary!

It is amazing, and even scary, because Jesus, having taken his disciples off to a quiet place for a break, quickly and willingly abandons all hope of a break when the crowds turn up at Bethsaida.

They had discovered where Jesus had gone, and they’d followed. There was to be ‘no hiding place’ from the people and the busyness – and Jesus did not try to hide from them or avoid the demands of helping them. It tells us that *he welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God and healed those who needed healing.* (vs.11) And indeed, he went far beyond what the disciples would have done, and probably what they crowds would have expected – for he fed them – the feeding of the 5000 is the only one of Jesus’

miracles that is recorded in all 4 gospels – it must have made some impression.

It just seems to have been the case that for Jesus, there was really no such thing as being ‘off duty’ or ‘on holiday’ – most of us would have resented and resisted this invasion of our privacy, but for Jesus, people with all their many needs took precedence. As Mark’s version of the story puts it, *He had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*

Now I find this really difficult – I just have that feeling that unless we get some breaks, we don’t function so well, and we aren’t so effective – tiredness blunts our activity and this sense of ‘compassion’ that Mark talks about – and yet for Jesus, and to an extent for his disciples, there was to be no respite. So how are we to apply this part to ourselves? What are we to say about the way in which Jesus reacted to the people who interrupted his break?

Well, perhaps there are at least 2 appropriate and helpful lessons for us.

- a) It tells us that, compared to ourselves, **there is something special about Jesus.**

This is Jesus, so full of perfect, unlimited, tireless, **human** compassion, because he is also Jesus, the Son of God – **divine** as well as human. This is Jesus who is tirelessly there for us, now, just as he was tirelessly available to the people, then. This is the Jesus who is now exalted at the right hand of God, but who as the book of Romans, ch.8 vs.34, says *is also interceding for us* – Jesus, through whom we will never be separated from God’s love no matter what our circumstances or surroundings.

Against this background, we can really remind ourselves that Jesus is never ‘off duty’ as far as our lives are concerned – what an encouragement, what a comfort.

And, as Son of God made flesh and blood like us, and welcoming the crowds, Jesus reflects the characteristics and ways of God, the eternal Father who, in the words of Ps. 121, *will not slumber nor sleep, nor let your foot slip* – that at all times and in all places, we can *lift up our eyes to the hills, to the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earthwho will watch over our coming and going, both now and for evermore.*

This is a bigger picture of the very same thing that we have noticed in Jesus' welcoming of the crowds – a picture of God who is never 'off duty in his care and his commitment to people like us – that in the words of the old children's hymn, *God is always near me, in the darkest night, he can see me just the same, as by broad daylight.*

God is on duty 24 x 7 – available when we seek him, but also, and even, when we are not really thinking so much about him – and in a way, it may be a bit more like that when we are on holiday.

This is surely a great cause for reassurance – most especially when our lives are feeling under pressure or strain; when we are very busy, when life is 'spluttering along' rather than running smoothly – God is never far away, and always concerned, with commitment to us.

However, if we find this a very helpful and comforting thought, as we surely should, it should make us want to maintain our active awareness of God and our daily response to God – that it should act as a safeguard from us '*taking a holiday from God*' – even if we are out of the usual routine of life, even though we may be holidaying in some other part of the country or some other country – that we should want to sustain our sense of trust in Christ – our awareness of belonging to him by faith. Maybe that should express itself in maintaining a pattern of daily devotions – Bible and Bible Reading notes should be part of our holiday packing – and part of our holiday 'sightseeing' should be to try to find a church in

which we can worship, even if it is not exactly like our own familiar church at home.

- b) As well as this section of Scripture telling us that there is something uniquely special about Jesus, perhaps it also tells us **that there should, at least, be something a bit special about the people of Jesus.**

Maybe it tells us that although we are on holiday, and are legitimately released from the everyday demands and responsibilities of our lives – including our main areas of Christian service – yet we still do need to be people who are ready and willing to respond to special or urgent situations that we might encounter – so that if there is no-one else to step in and help and assume responsibility, we will be willing to do so. Now, I think, and I hope, that such situations would be few and far between, but that as the people of Jesus we do have to be ready ‘to give the cup of cold water in his name’, to be ‘the good Samaritan’ in obedience to his teaching – to be careful about adopting a blanket ‘I’m on holiday – it’s not my problem’ sort of attitude.

And there may even be occasions when that verse from 1st Peter about *always being prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you the reason for the hope you have* may become relevant and the situation may be appropriate – where, arising naturally in the course of our holiday contacts and conversations, we may be able to say something, quietly but helpfully, about the foundation of hope that we have in our lives because of Jesus Christ – that in this sense, there is never any time when we are completely and absolutely ‘on holiday’.

1. **So**, as we conclude, I’m very glad that this chapter where we are told about the feeding of the 5000, **affirms the basic idea that it is a good idea to take a break.** I can go away on my holidays with a clear conscience, and so can you!

2. **And**, we can do so **reminded that Jesus reflects the way God is in his care for us – 24 x 7**. He is never ‘off duty – he watches our coming and going for ever.
3. **But**, it surely also tells me that **I need to take my trust in Christ with me** – it’s an essential part of my holiday packing, and I need to be ready to respond with Christian love and care in situations where it is really needed.

Enjoy your holidays!