

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost  
Mark 6.30-34, 53-56  
Bishop Brad Billings

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If you have had the good fortune to travel to the island of Iona off the coast of the western highlands of Scotland  
The first thing you notice when there is the silence  
The quiet  
It takes a little while to really sink in  
I remember – having left the ferry  
Walking along the gravel road that passed between the stone houses  
Toward the Abbey  
And thinking to myself  
There's something different about being here  
There's something missing  
And as I neared the Abbey, I realized what it was  
What was missing here is – noise  
The noise of everyday life that we are so used to  
Cars driving along the road – there are almost none on the island  
Mobile phones ringing – good luck if you can get coverage here  
There was none of the noise of the city that we are so used to  
The hum of conversation  
Motors and engines  
Tram bells  
Construction going on....  
The quiet on Iona Island was often absolute  
But for the waves breaking on the shore in the distance  
The sound of animals of various type  
And here the animals here run free – no fences – so sheep and goats  
would pass you on the road  
There was the occasional step of another pilgrim or a group of  
pilgrims making their way to the Abbey  
Otherwise  
It is the quiet that you really notice in this place

This is a travel story  
It's as close to travel as we can get these days – to look back on  
pictures, and recall stories, and cherish memories, about journeys  
taken in the past  
This one was about ten years ago for me – I spent my long service  
leave in northern England and Scotland and I was due to travel there

last year on a long-awaited trip with Karen my wife, to experience what I experienced then alone, together  
That will have to wait  
But we still have the memories and the experiences  
And the hope we will go on that journey in the years to come  
(I have the flight credit)!

This experience, I think, fits beautifully into today's reading  
For we hear in St Mark's gospel today  
That when the disciples had come back from a journey – having been sent out in the previous chapter, to go and to minister among the people in twos – we read that  
“the apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, ‘Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.’”  
It's interesting that the word used to describe this “solitary place” is in the Greek *eremon*  
which means a desolate place – it's an adjective that is used to describe the wilderness or the desert – places where no one is present  
it's a word very closely related to *eirene* – which means peace  
the deserted place is a place without other people  
where there is only the self present  
is a place of peace – simply because there is no one else there  
hence “a solitary place” is a very good translation  
in v. 31 here Jesus implores his disciples to come to this solitary place that they might rest awhile  
and in v. 32 we read they went away in a boat to find this solitary place –  
but of course, as we read in the narrative we hear that the needs of the crowds are great  
and that Jesus and his disciples cannot find any place of peace for the crowds continually follow them  
and – in his great compassion for them – Jesus cannot and does not turn them away - but meets their needs

Earlier in Mark's gospel when Jesus withdraws to a quiet place to be alone before dawn  
people come looking for him  
and when he finds him Peter tells him that everyone is looking for him  
one translation puts it like this – everyone was hunting him down

I'm sure we have all known and experienced the demands of others  
If not of crowds following us with their sick and their needy –  
pleading for healing – as Jesus and his disciples experience here  
For all of us, I am sure the demands and the needs of everyday can be  
overwhelming  
Whether it is work, family, neighbours, friends – or whatever the  
situations may be that you face right now  
Whether lockdown or the threat of it – and as I began to write this we  
were not in lockdown in Melbourne, and now we are! Again!  
The ongoing pandemic  
And all the uncertainty it generates in our day to day lives also  
impacts on us in so many ways  
The struggles, the problems, the complexities, that we all face and  
deal with, in day to day life  
Are always present  
They are very real  
And sometimes they are overwhelming – especially in times such as  
these  
and that's why I want to draw out of our Gospel reading this morning  
this exhortation –  
these words of Jesus –  
“Come away to a deserted place, all by yourselves, and rest a while”  
come and find  
in the midst of all the noise and the hassles and all the stuff of  
everyday life  
a place of rest  
a place of quiet  
a place of peace

I found Iona island to be a place where this peace and this quiet came  
very naturally and very easily  
And I'm sure that is linked very much to its isolation  
It is the solitary place – a place apart from everywhere else  
even today, with all of the fast and convenient means of transport  
that we are so used to  
Iona island is not easy to get to  
You need to take a car ferry – usually from Oban on the west coast of  
Scotland  
Which takes you to the Isle of Mull  
It's a good one hour to drive from one side of that island to the other  
On a very narrow, single lane, road

To the place where you then need to get another ferry from the island of Mull to Iona  
(some of you may have done this very journey in the past)  
Not far from where you get the ferry to Iona, still on the island of Mull, is the town of Bunessan, which the musically minded will recall is the name of the tune for the hymn Morning has Broken – I had a beer here on my way to Iona...  
It's a short crossing from Mull to Iona  
And there are no cars allowed on this ferry – except tractors and essential equipment occasionally  
It's very much dependent on weather whether you can cross at all  
In winter, Iona island can be cut off for days at a time

When the monk Columba travelled there – many centuries ago now, to bring the Christian message to the inhabitants of that time  
It was of course even more isolated  
More remote  
But probably the quiet is still the same – centuries later  
On the day I visited Iona  
The sun was warm overhead  
The sky was very blue  
And the sea was flat and calm  
It was beautiful of course  
But it is the quiet I remember most – as I have observed as I began this message today  
Even in the church  
Though many others were there for the service I attended  
It was quiet  
There was a very real sense of calm and of peace  
And there were several periods of time during the course of the liturgy when there was no music, no singing, and no one speaking  
Only silence  
It's in these moments you realize how hard it is to be still and silent and to find that place of rest  
Your mind starts racing  
When the prayer ends – and nothing else starts  
No music, no reading, no one speaking  
You start thinking –  
Does the priest leading us know what she is doing?  
Has she lost her place?  
Is she confused?  
What is meant to happen next?

But the silence and the pauses are intentional of course....

So I think the learning and the lesson here is this

We each need to think about and plan for how we will respond to the invitation and the call of Jesus

Given to his disciples in this morning's reading from St Mark's Gospel  
And to we who are his disciples today

To "Come away to a deserted place, all by yourselves, and rest a while"

And make sure we built these withdrawals and these times of silence and solitude

However brief and infrequent they may be

Into our spiritual lives and discipline

Especially in times such as these, when everything around is often fast-moving and somewhat chaotic, and uncertain

The invitation of Jesus is constant and unchanging... and spoken afresh today

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11.28).

The Lord be with you