

# Rest in a time of distraction

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*Sunday 26 April 2020*

Unshakeable God, you are our ever-present help in times of trouble. Amidst all the isolation, grief and fear caused by this crisis, renew in us your peace, restore to us your perspective, and reveal to us your presence as we spend this time with you now.

We rejoice in God's presence today in the words of Psalm 46:6,10f:

<sup>6</sup> The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;  
he utters his voice, the earth melts.

<sup>10</sup> "Be still, and know that I am God!  
I am exalted among the nations,  
I am exalted in the earth."

<sup>11</sup> The LORD of hosts is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Jesus invites us into a deeper relationship with God, into a more restful life lived in God's presence. In a time of personal distraction, fearful distortion and cultural disruption we listen again to his words, found in Mark 6:30-32:

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." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

With travel restricted, workplaces closed, restaurants and gyms shut, we have an unprecedented, unexpected opportunity for intimacy with Jesus. He beckons us to a place of solitude, away from the crowd, saying, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." Henri Nouwen, in his book *The Way of the Heart* describes solitude as 'the furnace of transformation'. 'Without it,' he said, 'we remain victims of our society and continue to be entangled in the illusions of the false self. Solitude is the place of the great struggle and the great encounter - the struggle against the compulsions of the false self, and the encounter with the loving God who offers himself as the substance of the new self.'

So, we ask ourselves, what are the characteristics and compulsions of our 'false self'? What masks do we hide behind? What behaviours do we use to avoid God's presence and try to protect ourselves from change? We confess these defences and avoidance strategies to Jesus now.

*Pause and pray*

We also take time to name friends and family who aren't Christians, whose usual securities are being shaken and whose normal defence mechanisms have been stripped away, asking that they might begin to consider Christ's invitation to 'Come with me'.

*Pause and pray*

Christ's invitation to solitude comes at a time when he was experiencing every kind of stress. Prior to this encounter he had been rejected in his hometown, then he had heard the devastating news that his cousin John has been executed, and now he is so busy that he hasn't even had time to eat. It is easy to think that we will finally get our prayer life sorted when all our problems go away, when things get a bit easier or we feel a bit more spiritual. But Jesus reminds us here and now that we must be forceful with ourselves in seeking the solitude of his presence, that he awaits us among our distractions and problems. Spending a few minutes here and there with Jesus, may be a good start, but when Jesus says, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." he is thinking of more than a few minutes. How might this work for us? Perhaps he is inviting us to take an extended time of prayer and worship, or maybe to study a part of the Bible in depth, to find some way of being in his presence.

At this time of so much distraction, we take hold of God's assurance in Jeremiah 33:2f, promising us fresh inspiration and revelation whenever we call on his name:

Thus says the LORD who made the earth, the LORD who formed it to establish it—the LORD is his name: "Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known."

To God who has given us every moment  
to celebrate,  
to savour  
and satisfy,  
be heartfelt praise  
and joyful thanksgiving,  
now and always.

Amen.