

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 18 July 2021

Oh God, our great shepherd, set your path clearly before us and lead us to follow you willingly for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Mark 6:30-34; 53-56

Resting with God

Many things happen in the sixth chapter of Mark. For example, Jesus is rejected in his hometown; he sends the twelve on mission. John the Baptist is killed. Jesus feeds the five thousand and walks on water. These are all major events in chapter 6. The central theme for Mark is the inauguration of the kingdom of God in Jesus, so Mark emphasizes Jesus' identity as the true, divine shepherd. He will guide his sheep into the kingdom. Through healings and teachings, Jesus will give them rest with God in this restless world. With this understanding, first, we'll see a meaning of rest for the disciples. It will lead us to the restless crowd who were like sheep without a shepherd. Last, we'll see how we get rest with God and why it is helpful for the restless world.

1. Rest of Disciples in Jesus' ministry

Mark is a gospel where many things are happening 'immediately.' The use of the word 'immediately' shows the urgency of the gospel in that the people's need for the gospel is too great to waste any time. Although Jesus knows people's great needs, he tells the disciples to get away by themselves to rest as they've just come back from their mission. Jesus recognizes their need for rest. They even have no time to eat.¹ As they cross the Sea of Galilee in a boat, however, many people "saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them."² So their intended rest is not available. For the disciples, the rest may be to eat and to be relaxed for a while till they are physically restored which is what Jesus offers here. But rest doesn't necessarily mean a physical rest, but more than that.

In scripture, the word 'rest' -sabbath (שָׁבַת) first appears in Genesis 2:3 after God had finished the work in creation. It reads, "So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation." Since God is the spirit, what kind of rest does it mean? Genesis 2:1-3 describes the seventh day of God's creation week, in which

¹ Mark 6:31

² Mark 6:33

God rested from His work. God declares the seventh day both blessed and holy, pointing forward to the time when God would command the Israelites to honour the Sabbath day and keep it holy. The Greek word for rest is *anapausis* which Jesus used meaning, cessation, refreshment. Christ' rest is not a rest from work, but in work, not the rest of activity, but of the harmonious working of all the faculties and affections, of will, heart, imagination, conscience because each has found in God the ideal sphere of its satisfaction and development. As such, believers are strongly encouraged to enter into God's rest. In Hebrew 4:1-3, it reads;

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it. For indeed the good news came to us just as to them; but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened. For we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, "As in my anger I swore, 'They shall not enter my rest,' "though his works were finished at the foundation of the world.

We see that proclamation of the good news of Jesus is closely related to this promised rest with God. Take one example. When the disciples have come back from their work, they report what they have done which include healings, exorcism and proclaiming the gospel. They have delivered the good news that they have received from Jesus.³ So, whether they are with Jesus or away from him, they have never left Jesus – the word of God. Whether they are home or away, they are resting with God. Their relationship with the Lord has never been severed in any circumstances. But for those who are searching for healings, or the meaning of life, there is no rest.

2. The restless crowd without the word of God

Seeing the great crowd, Jesus "had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd."⁴ These words remind us of Moses's prayer in Numbers 27, in which he asks God to appoint his successor, someone "who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep without a shepherd."⁵ Like many shepherd languages in the Hebrew Bible, Mark

³ Mark 6:12-13 - So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

⁴ Verse 34

⁵ Numbers 27:17

portrays Jesus as a true shepherd to reveal Israel's false leaders as depicted in Ezekiel 34.⁶ Sheep need a shepherd to lead them on safe pathways, to help them to find food, to defend them against danger, and to restore them to the fold. Without a shepherd, they are restless. Moved in compassion for these lost sheep, Jesus 'began to teach them many things.'⁷ Against our expectation of instant healings or exorcism, the first thing that Jesus did is to teach them about the word of God. By feeding them with knowledge and understanding the word of God, Jesus shows himself to be a shepherd after God's own heart.⁸ Jesus knows that their fundamental hunger and sickness are caused by the absence of the living word of God. By listening to the gospel intently, the core of their being is restored by the word of God – the genuine rest which the world cannot offer. By this time we can see that rest with God is interchangeable with the peace of God. Resting with and in the word of God is not only for us but for others too.

3. Resting with the word of God

Immersing ourselves in the word of God is not only our duty as the citizen of God's kingdom, but it defines who we are. We may read scriptures daily; we may contemplate particular bible verses all they long or throughout a week. We may share our thoughts, concerns, hope, and dreams prayerfully with our fellow believers. Most of all, we pray to God for everything. It includes the fellowship in Christ as we wash one another's feet as our Lord did to us.

In our story time, we heard a story titled Aroha's way. The book is about a girl who often experiences a restless heart. In the book, Aroha often hears a mythical voice that would deny her integrity by saying that she is not good enough. It may be caused by her physical conditions, or it may be part of a child's growing process into puberty and adulthood. Aroha tries everything she can do to expel the voice from her. The question was that when we find 'rest' in Aroha and what it means to her. She finds rest in her when she is able to get rid of 'the voice' although it is only temporary. But Aroha has a better option too. She talks with her friends about it as it helps Aroha find her way home. The friends who help Aroha in this way may not just be friends, but friends who may deeply understand and love her. In the end, the meaning of rest for Aroha may mean being herself as she is and loving herself as she is. Simple though,

⁶ Ezekiel 34:5-6 - "They were scattered because there was no shepherd, and they became food to all the animals of the field and were scattered. My sheep wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill: yes, my sheep were scattered on all the surface of the earth, and there was none who searched or sought."

⁷ Mark 6:34

⁸ Jeremiah 3:15

the book resonates with many different ways that people may take in their spiritual journeys.

What about us?

We Christians have such a friend who loves us till he died on the cross. As believers being ourselves means to rest with and in God. Whenever we feel lost and discouraged, we pray to God, and we contemplate scriptures because they help us find our way home – to the Father’s house. It is how we rest with God and live in the word of God. Like Aroha’s friends did to her, when we are filled with this rest and peace in God, then we are able to listen to others’ restless hearts and share this rest in Christ with them. Amen