

HOMILY SUN 16-B
“Meditation and Ministry – A Fine Balance”
(Jer 23:1-6; Eph 2:13-18; Mark 6:30-34)

If a male sheep is a ram, and a female sheep is a ewe, why did the ram fall off a cliff? The answer is simple - because he did not see the ewe turn!

Breathe deeply and hold your breath. Now let it out. What have we done? We have filled our two lungs with air.

A Christian breathes with two lungs – a lung of prayer and a lung of action. To follow Jesus, we must balance meditation and ministry, prayer and action, in our life

The image of a good shepherd that dominates today’s readings is a well established one in the scriptures. Moses prays that the people will have a leader so that they will not find themselves like sheep without a shepherd. The prophets condemned the kings for failing to act like shepherds. Ezekiel promises a new age in which God himself will shepherd his people.

In the gospel, Jesus presents himself as that promised shepherd, a shepherd who balances prayer and service, meditation and ministry, in his person and his actions.

Though he was God, and perhaps especially because he was God, he himself went regularly into lonely places to pray, to meditate, to commune intimately with the Father. Then from out of that privileged time of prayer, he was able to reach out to the poor and needy, to have compassion on them, to feel in his guts for them, and to respond to their need by teaching and caring for them.

He did the same with his disciples. First he invited them to come and see where he lived, to stay with him, to form community with him. He taught them and showed them who he was, and only then, did he send them out to carry out his ministry, to teach and to heal. And even then, as we see in the gospel today, he would take them aside for more time of rest and renewal, or at least he tried to do that.

The message is clear. Jesus as Good Shepherd modelled ministry flowing out of prayer. He asks the same of us. If we are to live out our calling as disciples, as shepherds of one another, we must also balance meditation and ministry in our lives.

If we are to be like Jesus, do what Jesus did and handle the challenges of life, we must pray as Jesus prayed. If we are to be like Jesus, deal with the dysfunction around us, let go of resentment and anger, forgive as Jesus did, be free from addiction, live in joy and peace, then we must pray as Jesus prayed.

Hopefully, like the people in the gospel who hungered for Jesus' Word and sought him out in deserted places, we have come to this out of the way place, Lac St. Anne, as pilgrims and not tourists.

A pilgrimage always involves a journey to a special place where two realities meet – either sky and land, as at Kehewin, Alberta, or land and water, as here at Lac St Anne. We come for a theophany. A theophany is a technical word for an encounter, a meeting – In our need, we have come to meet God in Jesus Christ, to seek him out.

We will find him here if we open our hearts to truly hear and listen to his Word, for he is to be found in his Word. We will find him in the sacrament of reconciliation, as we bring to his feet our failings and sin, confess them to another human being, and receive his forgiveness and healing.

Last night a young lady was journaling by the reconciliation rooms. She was completing her Step 4 of the 12 Step program – doing a searching and fearless moral inventory. When I noticed her, she told me that she was ready to do her Step 5 (Admit to God, herself and another human being, the exact nature of her wrongs). However, she was afraid – afraid of that Step, yet wanting and needing to do it, and afraid that if she put it off, she might lose her courage. So we did it late last night. She cleaned house and got rid of years of garbage, guilt, shame and fear. What a great start she had to her pilgrimage here at Lac St. Anne, She met Jesus last night, and left feeling joy, and much lighter. And so can we, in the sacrament of reconciliation.

We will also meet him here, and experience his compassion and love as we receive his Body and Blood. In prayer, meditation on his word, and liturgical celebration, Jesus is here to heal us and make us whole.

I would like to suggest three ways to pray as Jesus did:

1. Prayer of the Anawim

Anawim is a word for the poor, those who know they need God, those simple people who were the family of Jesus (Joachim and Anne, Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah) If we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we cannot live this day the way Jesus wants us to – it is impossible for us. We need his help. Many of us only pray at night – that is kind of proud, dutiful prayer. We need to pray in the morning, to grab a hold of Jesus and hang on.

That was the lesson St. Peter learned when Jesus walked on the water. Peter told Jesus to make him walk on the water too, and Jesus did. That is proud prayer, like so much of our prayer, trying to get God to do our will. However, when Peter was on the water, I am sure that he got proud, looked back at the boat to show off a little, took his eyes off Jesus, felt the wind, panicked, and started to sink, At that instant, his prayer changed to three words that came from his gut “Lord, save me!” That is the prayer of the Anawim, those who know they need God. That is the prayer that Step 11 of the 12 Step program speaks of

when it talks about “conscious contact with God.” That is how we must pray each morning if we are to live as Jesus wants us to.

2. Praying with Scripture, the Word of God

We must also learn to pray with Scripture. That is our book, the book of the Church. So often people tell me that they do not have a bible, and do not read or use it. I feel sad when I hear that, for we are starving ourselves spiritually. We need to nourish ourselves daily with God’s Word, for it is alive and active and transformative.

Yesterday a young lady came to reconciliation for the first time in thirteen years. She had rebelled and practically left the Church, blaming God for the loss of her best friend. When I asked her what had brought her back, she replied simply “The bible.” Apparently she had been cleaning house one day when she came across a bible, and started to read it at random. As she read, she became aware that something was missing in her life, and she felt her self becoming repentant, and wanting to come back to God, because of Scripture. We need to learn to ponder and pray with God’s word.

3. Prayer of contemplation

This is another big word that we need to use much more. I asked someone recently if they knew what it meant, and they replied that they had no idea. Contemplation is a very deep way of praying. Meditation is active, thinking about God’s Word. Contemplation is just being with God. An old man who used to sit in Church for a long time each day was asked what he did. He replied that he just sat there, looking at Jesus, and Jesus looked at him. That is contemplation.

There is a simple method to praying this way. First, read a passage of scripture. Second, meditate on that passage, think about what it is saying to you. Thirdly, pray with the words of that passage, for your needs and the needs of the world. And lastly, contemplate. Choose a word or phrase from the reading, and say that word as you breathe in, using that word or phrase as a mantra. Put all thoughts and feelings aside, and just be there, for as long as you want, letting God do whatever God wants to do in you, and believing that God is active in your silence. That takes strong faith. Contemplation is always an act of faith, and a very mature way to pray.

Let us now use the word “Jesus” and contemplate for two minutes. (...) Now slowly open your eyes and return to the celebration. Thank you – we have just entered into the prayer of contemplation as hundreds of pilgrims gathered here together – a beautiful experience.

Now that we have prayed, let us look at what flows out of our prayer, service. Just as Jesus came not to be served but to serve, so too we seek him not just for ourselves, but that we might be empowered to do as he did – to have compassionate, tender, loving care for our brothers and sisters in need.

A simple quiz underlines the two ways that we can serve others. What are the names of the two girlfriends that a priest can have? The answer is *Caring and sharing!*

We can serve by first of all *sharing* who we are with others. We can listen to their deepest emotions, fears and hopes, and we can share honestly and openly our own reality with them, striving to achieve a degree of intimacy.

Jean Vanier, who worked with the mentally challenged, learned great wisdom from them. He tells us that if we are humble, honest and open and share our weakness with our brothers and sisters, that frees them to be humble, honest and open to share their weakness with us, and together we grow. So we can serve by sharing.

Another word for sharing is fellowship. As Catholics we find it harder to believe in each other than we do to believe in God. Fellowship involves trusting one another and accepting each other as we are. We need to grow in finding God in one another. “To be close to God, be closer to people” is a beautiful saying. Jesus tells us in the gospel of John that he will reveal himself to those who truly love each other, who achieve intimacy with each other in trust and forgiveness, who really live his commandment to love one another. That is a powerful testimony to the importance of sharing in fellowship.

We also serve by *caring*, by doing things for others. We can volunteer our service in our community. We can help clean up after events, look after the physical needs of the elderly, maintain the Church buildings, choose a ministry for liturgy, and make our work one of true service to others. The late John F. Kennedy, former president of the United States, put it well when he told his followers in a campaign speech, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” I would say now, “Ask not what your Church can do for you; ask what you can do for your church.”

Perhaps the best known example of one who managed to balance meditation and ministry in her life is Mother Theresa of Calcutta. She would rise early with her sisters for an hour of listening to God’s word in contemplation and prayer. They would then celebrate the Eucharist. That empowered her to spend her day joyfully serving Christ in the sick and the dying.

One example of how she was able to love as Jesus did is told by Fr. Fullenbach. He went to India one year to work as a volunteer. One day he had struggled to care for a smelly, inconsiderate man, and was feeling rather discouraged. Later, he passed away the time rolling bandages and saw a sister washing a girl covered with sores all over – the kid was outrageous, kicking and screaming. He thought, “Aha, how long will she hold out.” The sister was struggling much like he had.

Then Mr. Theresa herself came in. He thought, “Good, now he would see what she would do.” She saw the situation and the struggle the sister had. She sent the sister away and took over! Finally, he would know what compassion is. The kid was as outrageous as before. “Good,” he thought, “a real test.” She dropped the sponge, held the child in her arms, looked into her eyes with penetrating love, and rocked her for over five minutes. Then she stopped, got the sponge and washed her, and the kid did not move. Amazing – he thought – and realized that this was the first time he thought she truly is a saint.

The need for vocations brings together both elements of prayer and service. We must pray for more shepherds to serve the Church, especially among the First Nations and Métis peoples. Vocations are the fruit of prayer, and calling forth young people. An example is Fr. Peter Altamirano OMI from Peru who was just ordained last week at the ST. Laurent pilgrimage in Saskatchewan.

The Eucharist we celebrate today, as we begin our pilgrimage, is a special encounter with Jesus. He is present in each one of us who are here. He is present in his Word that we have just proclaimed. And he is present in his Body and Blood that we share in communion. And then he missions us, sends us out to love as he loved, with compassion, forgiveness and understanding, to teach and to heal.

So remember, to do as Jesus did, be sure to balance meditation and ministry, prayer and action in your life, and to do that here, at Lac St Anne, during this pilgrimage.