

Rest and retreat

I've just returned from some holidays with my family, and as I write Pastor Fraser is still on holidays with his family, soon to return. This has caused me to reflect a little on the theme of *rest* and *retreat*, especially in our life of faith.

At one point in the Bible, Jesus' Apostles come to him very excited about the things they were now able to do with his power and authority. They had been healing the sick, casting out demons, and so on. They probably expected Jesus to get excited with them or give them even more spectacular work. At least they wanted him to do something to keep the momentum going. Instead Jesus says something surprising, '*Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while*' (Mark 6:32).

Rest and retreat are very important to Jesus. If you read through the Gospels looking for this theme you'll often find Jesus himself going off to rest and pray. He's not saying anything new of course, because God's word speaks often of the need for rest. In Genesis we hear that God himself rested from his work of creation, and so a day of rest was built into the structure of the universe itself - six days for work, one day for rest. For the people of Israel this became known as the 'Sabbath day', the day of rest.

We human beings are not built to work continuously. When we do we can harm ourselves and those around us. We need rest. In our society this has been made even more difficult by the hectic pace of modern life. Work can also become a form of idolatry that we sacrifice ourselves to if we're not careful. As Christians we should be conscious of the very basic need for rest as human beings.

But this seventh day of rest for the people of Israel was not only to be a day to sit on the couch or lie on the beach! This was the day to rest *in* and *with* the Lord. The Sabbath day of rest was also the day of worship. We see the same emphasis in the New Testament. The Apostles retreat *with Jesus*, and so they can be refreshed for all they are called to do.

This happens for us week by week as we gather to rest in God's presence, and daily as we rest in God's word. From our perspective there is much to be done to enable a worship service to happen, and thank God for all you willing servants! But we dare not allow all our activity around worship to distract us from what it is at its centre, resting in God's presence and allowing him to serve us.

Often Christians have also found it helpful to intentionally set aside longer times of a few days or more for an extended spiritual retreat. In some denominations this is mandatory for pastors and other church workers. Pastor Fraser and I are planning to go on a short pastoral retreat together this year as part of our ministry here at Bethlehem. We will be looking to God and his Word for our ongoing rest and refreshment, in order to carry out the work he calls us to in this place.

The book of Hebrews picks up on the theme of rest and retraces it through the Old Testament, concluding that the total and complete promise of rest never came, so that *'there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God'* (Heb 4:9). This we find in Jesus and the eternal rest he brings through his death and resurrection for us. Jesus not only models the need for rest, but also points to himself as the only true and lasting source of rest. He says, *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you **rest**. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find **rest** for your souls."*

God bless you, Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer