

HOMILY SUN 16-B PREACHED VERSION  
“Meditation and Ministry – A Fine Balance”  
(Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 23; Ephesians 2:13-18; Mark 6:30-34)

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Recently, Novalis, the Catholic publishing company that puts out the monthly *Living With Christ* agreed to publish *Drumming From Within*, a book I have written on my experiences of ministry among the First Nations and Métis peoples over the past thirty years. One of the editors that I have been working with over the past few weeks regarding the manuscript is Anne Louise Mahoney.

It so happens that she is the author of this Sunday’s commentary in the *Living With Christ*. Needless to say, I was interested in what she had to say, and was struck by her closing assertion: “All we have to do is listen to Jesus and follow him.”

That is the message that I want to share with us today: Listen to Jesus and follow him. Be with Jesus in prayer, and then do his will in ministry. In essence, the readings today invite us to walk a fine balance between meditation and ministry.

A fairly obvious feature of our modern society is busyness, activity, a fast pace of life. The technology that was promised to provide more leisure to us has, it seems, backfired and given us instead more demands on our time and energy and financial resources than ever before.

It seems that something similar was happening to Jesus and his disciples. The success of the Galilean ministry brought crowds of people to them, all demanding their time and attention, to the point of having no time to even eat a meal together.

The solution proposed by Jesus was a retreat. They would go away to a deserted place where the disciples could share with him their experience of ministering in his name, and send some quality time being with him and listening to him.

There is here an important teaching for our time. Jesus took time to pray. Jesus wasted time in prayer, in quiet, intimate communion with the Father in the Spirit.

More than that, Jesus modeled that prayer for his disciples. He invited them to do the same, to take time to just be with him, to be in communion with him, to stay grounded in their relationship with him. He delighted in the sharing of their experiences with him, and in teaching them about the Father and his relationship with the Father. Their ministry was to be grounded in a prayerful relationship with him and the Father in the Spirit.

Prayer, then, must be a non-negotiable foundation for any life of ministry. The spiritual writer John Shea, in his book *Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels*, has some beautiful insights into the nature of prayer as a foundation for action using the passage about the transfiguration. He writes, “The transfiguration teaches us about prayer. Prayer is both the process of ascending human and descending divine. It is a combination of human

effort and divine grace. People climb the mountain; God descends from the sky. Moses and Elijah are not absorbed in Jesus' transfiguration, but concerned about his liberating action in Jerusalem. They are on the mountain but they are considering the affairs of earth. Prayer on the mountain is the preparation for action on earth."

So our prayer serves two purposes. It draws us closer to God, and provides the guidance and strength needed for ministry here on earth.

Prayer is both talking to God and listening to God. We can share our concerns with the Lord as the disciples did with Jesus. But we must especially listen to God's voice through the scriptures and especially in the silent reaches of our hearts, in meditation and contemplative prayer.

The eleventh step of the 12 Step Program puts it beautifully: "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, seeking only the knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry it out."

Carrying out the will of God would be for us the ministry that we end up doing which flows out of our prayer. It should be modeled on the ministry of Jesus and his disciples, which is described in today's readings.

The first element of ministry that leaps out of the pages of the gospel is compassion. Jesus had compassion on the people, for they were like sheep without a shepherd. Somehow the civil, political and religious institutions of that day were failing the people, were not really answering their needs. Perhaps the all too common human lust for domination, power and control had infiltrated all segments of that society. Could it be possible that greed was as active then as it is now, in our present day economic downturn caused partially by systemic greed?

Whatever the cause, Jesus began to minister to the people, to teach them about the love of God for them, to build up their love for themselves, to teach them the meaning of their lives, to give them meaning for their lives, to teach them how to forgive and heal and move on in their lives, to give them hope.

The second reading asserts that Jesus made peace and brought about reconciliation by his death and resurrection. His ministry was a ministry of reconciliation, reconciling humanity to God and teaching us to repent, to heal, to be reconciled with God and with one another. That must also be the focus of our ministry today. The ministry that you and I do today must be modeled on the ministry of Jesus.

In summary, then, our ministry today must be rooted in a personal, intimate, prayerful relationship with God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The ministry that flows out of this relationship with God is all about teaching faith and love, working for justice and bringing about reconciliation

A good example of someone who lives the message of the readings today is Fr. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, well known writer and lecturer who founded the Center for Contemplation and Action in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The name of the center is a teaching in itself. Rohr teaches the importance of contemplation or prayer, out of which flows action or ministry.

A way that I personally try to live out the teachings of this Sunday's readings is by means of a *poustinia*. Poustinia is a Russian word meaning desert. It involves going away monthly to a quiet place like our cottage at Clearwater Lake for a twenty-four hour period of prayer, fasting, rest and for me, writing. I find that this practice of a monthly poustinia keeps me grounded in an intimate relationship with God and provides direction and energy for the upcoming month's ministry. It is a practice that I would encourage us all to make part of our lives.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today in a sense is time away, going away to be with Jesus, to gather together around him, to share with him our lives in the penitential rite, to listen to his word in the readings, and to enter into intimate communion with him through the Eucharist.

May our celebration today deepen our prayerful relationship with God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and empower us to go out, forgiven, healed and restored, to minister to one another as good shepherds in our own right.