

Homily for The Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B) (19/07/09)

Jesus had sent his friends out in pairs to proclaim repentance, and to heal the sick, and now they have returned to tell him what they have done. He can see that they are tired and drained, but there is no peace to be had because so many people are coming and going, so he calls them to come away with him to rest. In fact, circumstances conspire to prevent them from having that rest, but this seemed a good opportunity to reflect a little on the nature of rest, and holidays. I was thinking about this on Friday on the train back from London, because the evening paper was full of articles about the end of the school term, many of them written by parents desperately trying to work out how to entertain their children for the next seven weeks; I imagine those parents will be delighted to read today that the government is saying that if the swine flu epidemic proceeds as expected, lots of schools simply may not re-open in September. The world we live in, where people have such busy lives, seems rather a sad sort of place when our children's holidays become a chore.

In fact, the society we live in has a bit of a problem with the whole idea of leisure, and holidays, and time off. We are not really sure what it is all about. Of course, we need to rest; we cannot be busy doing things all the time. Of course, we need to take exercise, it is good for us to keep fit. But is this enough? What is the point of holidays, or of days off? Are they just there so that we can be rested and refreshed and go back to work more eager, more efficient, more productive? Can that really be all there is to it, because if so then work has come to dominate our whole lives: our leisure time is simply aimed at making us better workers, more efficient drones in some great machine. For many of us our time off is consumed either in doing things that will make us better workers (which, in a sense, is another sort of work) or in household chores (another sort of work) or in anaesthesia, hypnotised by the television so that we are awake, alive, but not actually really thinking, or hearing, or seeing.

Today's gospel story is actually quite helpful here. Jesus doesn't say to his friends 'go off and have a rest'; he says to them 'come away and rest for a while'. The point is not simply that they are going away, but that they are going away with him. The point of the exercise is not simply to separate themselves from the crowds, but to give themselves time with the Lord. They cut themselves off from busy-ness, from activity, from doing things, in order to be with Jesus. Their time off is not just about getting away from the demands of the crowds. It is also about getting in touch with a deeper reality, with the meaning of human existence.

Sadly, our lives have come to be dominated by work, so that we even come to think it is the central aspect of human existence. The truth is that work is certainly a part of being human, but it is only a part of it. If we think of our holidays and our days off as simply a chance to rest so that we can work better, then we are being dominated by function, by what we do. This actually makes us less human. In fact, the point of our time off is not to make us better workers, but to enable us to get in touch again with the deeper truths of human existence. Time off is not meant to make us more efficient, it is meant to make us more human. It is meant to confront us with questions like what is life for, what should I do, what might I be, what can I hope for. It is meant to lift

our eyes from the daily round, and allow us to plunge more deeply into life lived to the full.

Unfortunately, many things conspire to make such a productive use of leisure more difficult. The Protestant work ethic that still plagues us makes us feel guilty if we are not busy. We have been deceived into thinking that inactivity is the same as laziness, but this is not so. It is not the person who sits and looks at the view for twenty minutes who is lazy, it is the person who will fill their time with any sort of stimulus and activity so long as it stops them having to think. Unfortunately, we have not been very good at teaching our young people about this. We are very keen that they should learn how to do lots of things, that all sorts of useful information should be at their fingertips; that is fine so far as it goes, but the mistake is that we think that is education, whereas in fact it would better be called training. If we wanted to educate people we would help them discover how to listen to music (rather than merely to hear it while doing something else); or to read novels, or poetry, or to look at paintings and photographs and statues. We would teach them how to stand before something and say 'wow' – not because it is useful, or clever, or pleasurable, but because it makes you see yourself, or the world, or life differently. We would help them understand that the purpose of art is not to show you a clever reproduction of something you have already seen, still less to shock or outrage you, but to help you see something that you would not otherwise have noticed, to show you something new about a familiar object or person.

All this may sound as if it is making rather a big demand of your week away in a campsite. Can it really become such an elevated thing as I have been describing? Well, I don't see why not. All I am saying is that we should expect our leisure time, at some time and in some way, to make us sit back and say 'God is good, the world is good, life is good'. It would do us no harm to hope for this, to long for this. It would do no harm for us all to say that a part of the holiday will involve making sure that everyone in the family has a chance to see, or to read, or to hear something beautiful that helps us keep in mind that, important as work is, there are other things much more important. Real leisure, a leisure that does not just refresh the mind and the body but also the soul, is always a celebration of the good things of God's world. The creation story tells us that on the seventh day God rested, but before that he revelled in his wonderful creation: 'God saw all he had made, and indeed it was good' (Gn. 1.31). So, I would like to suggest that we try to approach this summer with the intention of putting the world of work back in its place. There must be something that we can do to help each other enjoy this experience of something deeper, something more true, more beautiful. Whether that is the beauty of a picture, or a garden, or a place, or a conversation, or a film that is more than mere entertainment - that leads us deeper into reality rather than sheltering us from it, or a surprise visit to family, or real time well spent with old friends, in the end it doesn't much matter. But no holiday, or time off, is really worth the effort if it doesn't leave us just a little bit more human, just a little bit more in touch with the real world, which is so often hidden from view. We can only really make sense of the world of work if our leisure time gives us some sense of the deeper realities that make the world such a beautiful, wonderful place.

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Many of the ideas in this homily come from 'Leisure the Basis of Culture' by Josef Pieper (St Augustine's Press, South Bend, Indiana, 1998 [1948])