

Two weeks ago I attended a course called ‘Leadership in Lockdown’. To be honest it wasn’t what I thought it was going to be about, but actually that turned out to be a good thing. The presenter spent a lot of time talking about the need to change our expectations when all that around us is also constantly changing. Setting a routine in concrete during a time when goal posts and guidance are constantly moving he suggested was counterproductive for good mental health. Instead he advocated two things. Each week – decide on a plan for that week – and don’t be too ambitious. Give it a skeleton shape which reflects what will need to happen for this week only. He suggested this include everything from work commitments to exercise and eating plans.

Then to compliment this, he suggested that each day over breakfast, you select three and only three, tasks for that day which need to be achieved. If more gets done that’s great, but allow your expectation to be three. Then at the end of the day acknowledge how it has gone.

For many of us our patterns of living have altered significant in the last 5 months, and are likely to continue to feel unfamiliar for some time, and he was suggesting that being realistic about the impact this has on our physical and mental health, and therefore the way we live needs to be part of how we live our lives. This way he suggested we create healthy patterns even in a time of uncertainty.

The other thing he suggested, which I found fascinating, was his new approach to holidays. Many of us will need to find new ways to have a break and rest this year. He pointed out that often we don’t plan holidays – or rather we plan getting there and the destination and maybe even accommodation, but often holidays are about lack of plan – freedom to do what we want when we want. He pointed out that in the current context a relaxed holiday may involve planning it within an inch of its life and taking joy in that. For example, if a holiday is at home then a plan that says ‘movie afternoon’ or ‘walk on the canal’ stops the holiday becoming ‘clearing cupboards’!

One of the reasons that I found all of this really helpful is that I had grand plans at the start of lock down for all that I was going to do and create and be – and while some has been achieved, most has not. I can really relate to the words of Paul we just heard read. I love this verse from Romans’ - *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate*¹. How many times have any of us uttered these same words? Why can’t I live out the commitments and actions I desire to easily? Paul in this passage seems to lament his ability, and the ability of all believers to hold on to what is true. He ponders this throughout the whole passage.

Paul was a strict Jew who had lived with a strict observance of the law. Such devotees were haunted by the fear of breaking any of the rules. Paul’s language fits the portrayal of individuals who struggled with some enslavement to passion and

¹ Romans 7:15

human desires. Paul relates that this is still true as he tries to observe strict rules of Christian life will also be struggling with issue of the flesh and the issues of the spirit (7:16, 22-23)². Paul in his struggle begins to understand that, in his terms, he cannot have righteousness by simply observing the law, let alone Christian rules. Rather, righteousness must be accepted as a gift from God alone and we are invited to operate within the framework of the spirit. In other words, while rules and parameters provide us with a guide, we need to be open to what God is doing in the here in and now, and this will involve changing expectations and behaviour. God is holding us and guiding us, and we need to let God do this.

This is also the issues which Jesus is addressing as he speaks in Matthew 11 – you say you want one things and when it is given to you, you want another!

The first section of verses in this passage speak of Jesus frustration that people criticise John because he fasts, and then Jesus because he doesn't – what sign of God do you want!! You hear his wonder at what humans need to believe – but this passage is not just a reprimand – it is also a promise! It is why we have two separate sections in this passage spelt out in today's gospel.

In contrast to Jesus frustration at the start, we jump 6 verses ahead and hear Jesus offer comfort – he says 'look I know this is all too much for you – so just let go and I will carry you!'

I have shared with St Anne's a story a few years ago of a friend who helped me understand this passage in a new way. My friend had just taken possession of her first mobility scooter. She is in her early 40's and had never driven a car or ridden a bike, and steering was a new thing for her. Thankfully her mobility scooter came with lessons on how it worked. As she had her lesson to control how it worked, her instructor told her that if all else fails, let go of the handles, as this turns off the motor, and the scooter will stop. 'Let Go and it will stop'.

What a great strap line for life 'To Stop – let go!'

How many expectations or situations or even circumstances do we face in life which escalate or cause us sleepless nights becomes we keep the motor running. How much would it transform our understanding of ourselves and even the situation if we just let go!

Now letting go is different to giving up. Letting go, means we relinquish the power, or even perceived sense of power that we have – to see where the journey might take us. I was never able to learn to roller skate or ice-skate because I never trusted myself (or others) enough to let go of the wall!

Letting Go takes a great deal of courage most of the time. But so often we have to let go of our expectations for things to change. One of the reasons I like the planning 3

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2054

things a day suggestion is it helps we to let go of needing to control too many things, but to do this I first need to stop and let God be present.

Sometimes we have to let go of our expectations, of how we think the world should be - if we are to move forward. Jesus, having just told the disciple's what discipleship would mean, almost immediately has to challenge their expectations of this very discipleship – step outside of how you think it will be or should be. Look at how it is now!

While this advice appears in both Luke and Matthew's Gospel's it is only in Matthew that we receive the additional words of comfort. "*Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you ... and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*³"

The rest Jesus speaks of here, is not rest at the end of the day – or even at specified period during the year or even at the end of our working life. Rest in this context is more about a state of being – rather it is the promise we are reminded of in Jesus – Emmanuel – God is with us – this is the rest – the letting go and letting God so to speak!

We are living in new times, and many of our certainties have changed, but God has not. Whether we are challenged that the patterns of life that don't seem to work for us; or like Paul we do *not do what we want, but we do the very thing we hate*; or if like the disciples we keep changing our minds about what will be evidence of God we will believe – whatever the challenge that is facing us God reminds us that - for the chaos to stop, we need to let go of what we are expecting - to stop, let go – and probably most importantly – Let God who is always by our side, offering rest!

"Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."
Amen

³ (Matthew 11:28-30).