

“Come and rest awhile”.

What do Catholic clergy do all day? I often wonder. Cardinal Dolan of New York recently recalled spending some time in a parish in Liverpool as a student in the North American College, Rome. On arrival he asked the Parish Priest what his duties would be. “Well,” said his new mentor, “I do as little as possible and you are here to help me”. That man was one of the hardest working of priests, but so laid back, few would guess. In contrast, it was said of one priest that he could preach most eloquently on eternal rest...from much personal experience.

“You are so busy”, people will tell me, apologising for making some request. “Sometimes” is the honest response. I have found that either I am intensely busy or would be idle if I did not always have lots of reading to catch up on. This is true at the micro level, where funerals never come singly but in batches; and at the macro level. When I was in St Marie's and involved in education I was seriously working hard and under pressure. Similarly when I was appointed to be Dean of Studies at the seminary in Cape Town I had a significant number of courses to prepare from scratch to unforgiving deadlines. Only once did I stand before a class with ninety minutes ahead of us with no idea what I was going to say. But being students, they didn't notice!

But busy or not, and whatever our profession, the Law of Sod will always apply. The call to the hospital will come when the spaghetti is just *al dente*, and be glue by the time you get back. You know how it works, so did Jesus and the apostles. The Twelve are just back from busy missionary work. There is much to talk about; many stories to tell. A quiet time on their own is what they need. Following the divine example, re-creation follows creation; work is completed by rest. But public opinion demands its celebrities. And the public will not be denied. Anyway compassion fatigue is not part of Jesus' plan.

“They were like sheep without a shepherd”.

It is an apt image for the crowds who thronged to hear Jesus. Without the protection of a shepherd sheep would be preyed upon by wolves and thieves. Without the guidance of a shepherd they would be unable to find pasture. Whether by wolves' teeth, robbers' knife or starvation the flock's life would be short. The lives of the peasants and artisans in Palestine at this time were harsh and short. The leaders, those who should look after the people in God's name, the aristocratic priests in Jerusalem and Herod Antipas, Tetrarch in northern Galilee, led lives of comfort. Excavations have discovered the luxurious homes of the elite in upper Jerusalem; and Herod had many fortress-palaces. Their affluence was paid for by the taxes of the peasants and artisans who were compelled to pay a significant part of their income in taxes to the rulers and tithes and taxes to the Temple. A bad harvest and peasants could fall into debt and debts could quickly result in them losing their land. Loss of land meant

shame and penury. The only employment open to a land-lost peasant was that of a day-labourer, like the workers in the vineyard in the parable, waiting in the market square for someone to employ them for the day. This was a precarious existence, hand to mouth, and usually a short one. Many of those who had lost their land joined the bands of bandits - and they wouldn't live long either.

"Harassed and dejected" (Mt. 9,36) aptly sums up the state of the mass of the people in Palestine in the first century. Average life expectancy was just 22-25 years for males and 18-20 for women. These averages are low because of the huge rate of infant mortality. Only about 20% of the population reached their fortieth birthday. Jesus would have been one of the older folk at the scene in the Gospel.

The crowd who flocked to see Jesus would have been a pathetic sight. All would have had some major affliction. All older people had tooth decay. This was a cause of 5% of deaths. Anyone over thirty would also have had some osteo-arthritic condition. Coughing, anaemia, measles, eye disorders were hardly considered diseases at all in so far as they were a normal part of everyone's life. Skin parasites were common as were internal ones like tapeworm. Most of the crowd would have been undernourished, many suffering malnutrition. Appropriately, necessarily, Jesus will not just feed their hearts and minds, he will feed their stomachs as well.

That the shepherds of the flock of God were abusing the sheep in their care was a frequent theme of the prophets. We heard Jeremiah in the first reading announce doom on those shepherds who allow his flock to be destroyed and scattered. God himself will gather them back from wherever they have been dispersed and lead them to fruitful pastures. Jesus is beginning to fulfil this prophecy as he cares for the harassed and dejected crowds.

Such readings of that from Jeremiah act as powerful provocations to clergy, or anyone in a leadership role, to examine their conscience; and ask: what do we do all day?