

Sermon: When am I closest to Jesus?

Reading: Matthew 14:22-33

Introduction.

Here's a question for us to ponder today. When do we feel closest to Jesus? We have been granted an amazing privilege to be in a relationship with our Saviour, not at some future time, when I have taken my last breath in this world, but in the here and now! So the question, 'When do you feel closest to Jesus,' is a valid and very practical one? Our reading today reveals something about our Lord Jesus, which, if correctly understood becomes a great encouragement to us. When we grasp this truth and we know this in our head and heart, nothing in life will ever be the same for us again.

Context

As we enter chapter 14 of Matthew's gospel we hear of the sad news of John's execution at the hands of Herodias. Jesus saddened by the news of John's death takes some time out to be alone with his disciples in a solitary place. It's not hard for us to understand why Jesus wanted to get away from the crowds and spend time alone with His disciples and in prayer.

As we discover, Jesus can never be alone for long before the word gets out and the crowds come gathering around Him, even in remote places as our reading today shows. Jesus shows his compassion for the crowds, over his own feelings, and goes amongst the crowds ministering to their needs, then feeds them all, with so much food none went hungry, each had more than enough, as 12 baskets were collected up afterwards.

Double feast

What a great day this was for the multitudes, they received a double feasting. Jesus fed them first with the word of God, feeding their souls and then with bread for their bodies. A double portion, a double feast, twice the feeding, twice satisfied.

Which meal was more important? Bread for the body or bread for the soul?

It's an interesting question to ponder because most of us would probably say the second one, with the loaves of bread and fish, to satisfy our physical hunger.

When we hold to this view we will focus on feeding the physical needs of the body as the most vital thing to do and prioritise this, however it seems Jesus has a different approach. According to Jesus it was the feeding of the soul on the word of God which was prioritised first, both at this gathering with the multitude and if you remember during His own time of testing and tempting in the wilderness. When Satan tested Jesus he tempting Him to turn the stones into bread to satisfy His physical hunger, however, Jesus replies, 'Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God'. Jesus prioritised the food as soul food first and then satisfied their hunger.

Now I can hear the arguments rising, people are more able to concentrate on the word of God when they are not distracted by hunger pains, this may be true but Jesus is telling us we must not neglect the Word of God to satisfy our physical desires of the flesh. Sadly far too many people today will feast to satisfy their physical hunger, eating 3 times a day and possibly even snacking in-between and never give a thought to the word of God, and yet Jesus clearly teaches and demonstrates through His own sacrifice, we cannot live by bread alone!

If we cannot live just on the physical food alone or we die! Although we may not die physically we will die spiritually. Often this can happen so slowly we hardly notice the life draining away, in fact, confuse this spiritual hunger for a physical hunger and eat more,

trying to satisfy the wrong hunger, or we will drink more, give in to the cravings of the flesh trying to satisfy what can only be appeased by 'Spiritual Food'. Ever wondered why alcoholism, drug abuse both prescribed and illegal, eating disorders, obesity, sexual and gender confusions are all increasing? Satisfying the wrong cravings with the wrong things leads to all kinds of health problems. The mighty oak tree is dies a long time before anyone actually notices because it happens so gradually we fail to see it until all life has gone. We cannot live by satisfying the flesh cravings alone, if we want to truly live and live life in all of its fulness then we must feed our souls with the word of God.

Imagine if you chose to stop eating and drinking all week, only eating one light snack on a Sunday morning for 15 minutes, how healthy would you be? How long do you think we would survive and function in our life, jobs, and other roles and responsibilities before we would get sick and die?

So if we satisfy our bodies physical hunger with daily food and a healthy diet to keep us fit and well nourished to keep us going throughout the day and the week ahead, why then are we content to have one light snack every week for our spiritual food? If Jesus says man cannot live on bread alone, then we must take heed of this teaching from our Lord, its important!

It doesn't take a genius to work out what is going wrong with this nation when its spiritual health has been shelved and considered a low priority. If you disagree, consider why the government allowed bike shops, DIY shops and then prioritising other non essential shops to open up before churches after the close down!!

We can exacerbate the low priority of spiritual importance when we don't give church a priority, when we neglect our own spiritual growth and development by neglecting the study of scripture in our prayer and devotional times. When Bible studies, prayer meetings, discipleship groups are neglected and sharing the gospel of Jesus is non existent, we have to ask ourselves the question, 'Am I yet still alive in Christ? We may look healthy on the outside but what is our heart matter, how is it with our souls? We can look healthy outside but inside we can be as dry and famished as a tree without water?

Jesus in the storm

Jesus recognises the need to spend time with His disciples ensuring they are fed and rested away from the crowds and demonstrating practically the importance of spending quality time in prayer. This is where our reading takes us today. After the multitudes have feasted on bread and the manna from heaven, Jesus tells His disciples to go on ahead of Him to take some time away from the crowds, He will dismiss the people and meet back up with them later. It seems the disciples were more than happy to do this as they leave Jesus behind to send the crowds away while they row back across the lake. Didn't any of them wonder how Jesus was going to get back considering they all arrived together in the same boat - it seems not!

The evening is drawing in, the crowds have slowly dispersed and Jesus heads up the mountain to spend some quality time alone with His Father, **(Matt 14:23)** By now its late in the evening, the wind has picked up and the sky is looking angry, The sky is growing darker and looks like a storm may be brewing.

The gentleness of the day has turned cool and windy and a storm is whipped up across the lake. The disciples are frantically rowing to find safe harbour but the harder they row the stronger the wind seems to be blowing against them. Its important to note here that even the disciples were not immune to storms in life, from hardships that come in our daily walk and even from the feeling anxiousness and worry which can overcome the best of us

at times, especially when we are getting tired. Becoming a Christian is no magic cloak protecting us from all of life troubles, pains and tribulations. The storms will come to the Christian as well as to the heathen and atheist!

The disciples are about to learn a valuable life lesson and one which we need to consider carefully in our own walk. When the storms hit us, how we respond is so important, our reaction and the coping strategies we apply will reveal to us the depth of our faith and how much we actually trust in God, as we face the challenges and tempest of life. So important is this lesson today it is recorded in Matthew, Mark and John's gospels. All three make mention of it.

Ignoring the Spiritual food

The disciples had just eaten a hearty meal which gave them much strength tackling the wind and the waves which fiercely blew upon the lake. If the disciples had not eaten, how long would they have lasted before they would have run out of energy exhausted. These men rowed for hours but got nowhere fast.

However it is the spiritual food which Jesus is wanting us to feed on here. When we feed our souls we discover our strength is in the Lord and He is our confidence. When we are running out of energy and our own resources its important remember Jesus tells us to, 'Come to Him He will give us rest!' The Psalmist knew this for he cries, 'Where does my help come from, my help comes from the LORD?' (**Psalm 121 1-2**).

The Watershed moment in life!

The disciples boat has been buffeted all night as they rowed furiously against wind and tide. It was shortly before dawn when Jesus went out to meet them. This is significant in itself. Notice here while the disciples were working in their own strength Jesus let them continue until the struggle was becoming too much for them. Jesus then sets of to intervene. There is an old saying which goes, 'The night is darkest just before dawn!' It was shortly before dawn when the darkness what at its peak and the disciples where exhausted that Jesus comes to their rescue. Jesus does not leave them in their darkest moment and neither will He do so with us. We must have faith to believe His word, for He says, I will never leave you, nor forsake you! He is with us as He was with His disciples in the darkest moment - just before dawn, when the light breaks through. Even in our darkest hour, calling out to Jesus we are calling upon the Light of the world and before Him demons flee. When we come to know the one who is all in all, He becomes everything we need to see us through, whether it be demons, plagues or the dark night of the soul, Jesus is sufficient and faithful.

When the disciples saw a figure walking across the waters they became terrified thinking they were seeing a ghost. They thought was an omen of their own impending doom, so they cried out in fear. They all saw and all were terrified. This account is a troubling one for those who want to dismiss the Scriptures because the writers are not the hero's of the event as they are the ones who are screaming out in fear. Also this account is not one persons account as it is recored in 3 of the gospels. If the gospels had been made up these accounts would have been written in a very different way.

Jesus calls out to His disciples to reassure them, the scriptures record, 'immediately' Jesus says, "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid" (**Matt 14:27**). How much time passes between Jesus immediate response? None for it is immediate!

Words of comfort in trials

The two phrases Jesus speaks to the disciples provide all with great hope, 'Take courage' and 'Don't be afraid', these are wonderful words to carry us through any storm of life

especially when we consider sandwiched in the centre of these two words Jesus says, 'It is I'. When we feast on the word of God we have a wealth of resource to draw from, the well is deep and so is our rope when we study and trust in God's word. The disciples are calmed with the reassuring words from the familiar voice of the Good Shepherd, (the sheep know the voice of their shepherd).

Up and downs in life

Peter now feeling much more courageous makes a bold request saying, 'Lord if it is you, tell me to come to you on the waters' (**Matthew 14:28**). Peter always provides us with a good opportunity to see how something should be done and how it should not be done! Interestingly there was absolutely no reason for Peter to come out on the waters, but his trust in Jesus was so strong, If the Lord wills it, then it will be so, even walking upon water! And of course Peter, bold, brave and courageous, takes the leap of faith and was the first ever to make the claim, I walked on water. However sometimes even when we know God is looking out for us and watching over us, to make sure the best outcome will happen for those who have faith in Him, like Peter we can become intimidated by the storm waters and wind that he lost his focus on Jesus and began to be overwhelmed and as a result started to sink. But once Peter cried out he realised just how close he was to Jesus for the Lord grabbed hold of him and pulled him back up.

Notice again the word 'immediately' in this passage! Whether it's a sinner who cries out to the Lord, 'Save me', or a believer feeling overwhelmed by life's storms, 'Lord save me' the response from Jesus is the same. For His big carpenter's hands take hold of us with a firm grip which will not let us go even when we have no strength left to hold on. His nail pierced hands are strong enough to redeem us from a cross and so are strong enough to save us from any part of life.

Summary

So to return to the question. 'When are we closest to Jesus? We have much to learn from our reading today, but we must remember we are closest to Jesus when we are in trouble. This is not to say we are not close to Jesus when singing hymns, going on a walk through the countryside, receiving answers to prayers, being filled with the Holy Spirit, or rejoicing in an uplifting sermon, these can all be mountain top experiences. However remember we are as close to Jesus in times of trouble and trial as we are in the mountain tops. Jesus is the same on the mountain as well as in the valley. Jesus response to His disciples and Peter was immediate. In fear and trouble Jesus encouraged the disciples to take courage, have heart, believe in Him and you will be saved. The Psalmist knew this, for he writes, 'God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble, therefore we will not fear..... (**Psalm 46:1-20**) Jesus is never late, His timings are perfect, remember He is ever present help in times of trouble. He is our refuge and our strength. We must learn to feast on the word (Scriptures), nourish upon God's word while we can for a time is coming when there will be a great famine upon the land, not of food and water but of the Word of God (**Amos 8:11**). We must eat while we still can, nourish our spiritual life while we still have time, how many now long for Bible Study groups and can no longer meet in this way? A famine is coming and we must be ready so when the storm comes we will have enough resources from the wells of God and filled with the oil of the Spirit to keep our lamps burning bright, so when we are in the storms, we know the one on whom we can call who will strengthen and prepare us for the battles which lie ahead. As the old saying goes, seven days without prayer makes one weak. The same is for eating our spiritual food, eating only one meal a week will not help us in the battle or storm? Feast and digest on the word of God while we have the opportunities. Never take your eyes from Jesus, be nourished with the complete word of God not just the sweet sugary bits so we will be ready for the storm when it comes. **Amen.**