

I was talking to a good friend of mine who recently lost his job. He was telling me how he was feeling flat and how difficult it was even to wake up in the morning and be motivated. The sense of emptiness and a lack of life made him feel very depressed. But he said, 'I cannot stay like this... I have a family to feed, children to educate and elderly parents who depend on me.' So, he went and hired himself as a part time cleaner in the company where he was working as a senior accountant.

Trust me, I have felt the same at times... what is the point of this day? What am I going to do today? The emptiness that comes from not being with you, my people, is excruciating. This feeling is real and it is so easy to bury oneself in a sense of self pity.

In today's Gospel we hear how Jesus tries to make his getaway to a secure hiding place. John the Baptist has just been executed at Herod's court, and when Jesus hears the news about the cruel death of this great spiritual leader, he withdraws to a lonely place: literally "to the wilderness". He tries to escape to the one place that is uninhabited by people, the same kind of place where John the Baptist himself lived. Jesus is overwhelmed by this death and human grief. He withdraws to find comfort and solace from the Father, with his tears and, it is not hard to imagine, with his premonition of what could be his own violent death. But out of his personal sorrow comes not self-interest but compassion. Although Jesus longs for solitude, he immediately sets this aside to meet the desperate needs of the sick and disadvantaged. He spends the whole day moving among the crowd, teaching and restoring the broken ones to wholeness, witnessing to us that even when our own hearts are broken, we can be ready to surrender personal agendas for the sake of others. Certainly, we need time for solitude and healing, but we must never become so absorbed with our own pain that we are oblivious to the suffering of others. From Jesus' pain was born compassion. As the crowds sought out John the Baptist in the wilderness, so the crowds now seek out Jesus. They seem to have a nose for hideouts. And when Jesus sees them, he has no spirit to play hide-and-seek. He knows why they are looking for him. They have come with their family and friends who are afflicted and troubled; they have come with their hope that he will do something. Jesus takes pity on them and heals their sick.

Jesus' desire for solitude has been overtaken by his compassion for the many people who look to him for help, and he is still ministering to the sick when evening comes. Meanwhile, the disciples see a problem with having such a large number of people on their hands and they give Jesus the benefit of their pastoral advice: "Send the people away and they can go to the villages to buy themselves some food." And when all the people go away, Jesus can be left in peace.

Jesus and the disciples give the crowd all they can: that is Jesus' lesson in pastoral practice. When Jesus faces the concrete needs of an expectant people, he does not see the need to send anyone away; but when he sees the brutalising power of Herod at work, he feels the need to go away himself. John's violent death must have saddened Jesus and, by necessity,

left him wondering about his own future. From the Gospel today we learn that the news of John's death makes Jesus want to withdraw.

This is an important insight about Jesus. He needs a time of peace and quiet, to gain strength from his Father to face the forces that will oppose him to death. He is not a robot. He feels the need to withdraw, to gather his thoughts, to marshal his resources, to pray. Yet his need for peace is not overriding; it is superseded by the needs of others.

Jesus does not send us away empty handed. Sure, life these days seem very empty and dark but when we seek the life giving presence of Jesus in prayer, we realise that darkness has no power anymore. When people sought Jesus, he provided them with abundance of nourishment. A genuine seeking of God can give us an enormous sense of satisfaction of being loved by God. Are you feeling lonely, abandoned, overpowered by darkness and grief, do you sometimes feel empty and flat... let us run to Jesus who will set aside everything to care for us for he is full of love and compassion for us.