In the gospel reading today we hear one of my favourite phrases from Jesus, one which I have taken notice of throughout my ministerial life, and one which has always been a source of comfort and spiritual refreshment to me.

The disciples whom Jesus had sent out to spread the gospel had returned to report back to their master. They were filled with excitement from all that they had done and all that they had been teaching others about Jesus and the Scriptures. However like many who have thrown themselves into work which has been placed before them, they were also very tired and because Jesus was always attracting people around him, there was little time and space for his disciples to rest, to reflect and to decide how best they were going to seek to continue to do the work that Jesus had set before them, and so Jesus says:

“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while”

These are the few inspirational words from Jesus which I have taken to my heart. First of all Come away, note that this is not an instruction but an invitation. Jesus had already sent his disciples out to continue his work and now rather than telling them to go off by themselves he invites them to accompany him. Come away, is a gentle invitation from Jesus to take time to reflect, to listen once more to him, to be guided by him so that they can be renewed for the work that is still to come.

Today we cannot do that with Jesus in quite the same way as his disciples, but what we can do is to take time out not just to be alone, but to be alone with him and that is truly inspirational and still achievable today. Such times are often known as retreats and they are often seen as times which in their own way demand a great deal from us.

To go away on a guided retreat requires not only the abandonment of time, but it also demands that we engage, we listen, we are instructed and then we reflect think, ask questions and thereby seek to grow in our understanding of Jesus. All of that sounds quite exhausting, and many of us today shy away from such times afraid of the demands, the expectations and the commitments which generally come with them, but this is not what Jesus was asking his disciples to do. The phrase goes on to say “Come away to a deserted place.” This does not have to be some Holy Monastery or sacred place, just a place generally away from other people, or at least away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

A deserted place for me can be an empty beach, a quiet walk in the countryside, or an isolated nook and cranny on the top of a mountain. Anywhere where we can have space and a little peace and quiet. Guided retreats have their place of course and can be very valuable but Jesus simply wants his disciples to go with him into a place where space, peace and quiet can wrap around them and refresh them.

When we accept the invitation to go with Jesus into such places we commit ourselves entirely into his care and protection. Jesus is with us always but in such deserted places we are enabled to open up more fully to his eternal presence and feel his companionship in all its fullness.

But we do not need to be alone to experience Jesus in this way, he goes on to say “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves.”

His invitation is to his fellow disciples and in today’s world that is you and I. Jesus calls us to go with him into a quiet place so that we can think clearly about our future direction and how best we will be enabled by him to continue in the work that he has set before us.

This seems very relevant to us in the Church today; we are faced with new challenges and the Church has to move into the future in a very different way and we need time, space, and some peace and quiet in order to think this through and to decide how best we are going to respond to the challenges facing us. At the moment gathering together physically with others and with Jesus is still not open to us and perhaps will not be for quite some time yet, but nothing not even a pandemic can prevent the Holy Spirit from bringing Jesus into our lives so that we can share a little time with him in our own deserted places.

So what kind of space do we need, what will fill us, open our minds, refresh us and excite us as we spend time with one another and with Jesus?

For me it has always either been solitude with a book, or prayer before the blessed sacrament, or it has been walking in the presence of the saints of old, like a visit to Lindisfarne. But my favourite retreat, my most rewarding invitation to be with Jesus was a cycling retreat in Yorkshire. One week, sharing time in prayer with a group of fellow Christian cyclists, having breakfast together and then setting out into the Yorkshire dales on our bikes with nothing else on our minds just the sheer excitement of cycling for six hours or so and setting ourselves the odd challenge of getting up Buttertubs Pass or similar climbs found on the routes of cyclists normally a little more experienced than ourselves!

The views were outstanding, the challenges demanding yet exhilarating, the sense of achievement each day truly amazing. It brought me alive to myself, and in so doing it made me more aware of the sheer wonder and glory of God, and the power of Jesus who was with us all as we journeyed together.

Our little group of cyclists however did not all make the grade, some were fit and others not quite as fit as others, but most of us stuck together, we waited patiently for the slower cyclists to catch us up, I shared my Jelly Beans with them to give them extra energy and we together took plenty of time to complete the Lord’s phrase:

“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”

We rested, we chatted, we encouraged one another; we ate together, laughed together and occasionally moaned together, sharing our aching legs and bottoms especially as the week drew to its close. But all the way through that experience Jesus was with us and challenging us to go the extra mile and so we did just that, despite it being very hard at times. Earlier I mentioned that not everyone made the grade, a couple of cyclists quit half way through the first day, “what’s the point they said” they looked at my bike with envy, they despaired that I and others in the group were experienced cyclists and amateur Triathletes, they complained that they had been miss-sold what they had signed up for. So they took themselves off by themselves, just did a few hours of gentle cycling from one coffee shop to another and so distanced themselves from the whole experience.

We in the Church of today cannot just take the easy option, we cannot just complain that this is not what we want or expected so we will just give up on it and do our own thing. We are called by Jesus to be the Church and as such we must be the Church. We must be like those early disciples and be prepared to give all the energy we have in order for the fullness of the power of the Holy Spirit to be released into the communities we are called by Jesus to serve.

Not all of us will be able to cycle up Buttertubs Pass, but we can all seek to support, encourage and to be there for each other, in order that together we may be enabled to respond to Christ’s call upon us.

Only then can we re-engage effectively with those around us. In the gospel story Jesus and his disciples were thwarted in their endeavour to rest by the sheer perseverance of those who followed them, Jesus did not however send them away, on the contrary he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. There are so many around us who need the accompaniment of a Good Shepherd. That role will of course always be filled by Jesus, but for them to be guided by him, they must first come to know him, and that will only happen if we as Christ’s disciples today can ourselves say to others:

“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”

Amen.