

The Spirituality of Seaside Holidays

By Andy Brierley, In-touch Editor

There is something almost instinctive about the British relationship with the seaside. Every summer, despite unpredictable weather and crowded motorways, people continue to head for the coast. Families pack buckets and towels into overheated cars, children drag nets and inflatable windbreaks across beaches, grandparents sit eating fish and chips while watching the tide creep slowly inward. Even those who claim not to enjoy holidays often seem happier after a few days beside the sea.

Part of this is undoubtedly nostalgia. The British seaside is woven deeply into our collective memory. Many people carry childhood recollections of arcades, donkey rides, sandcastles, ice cream melting faster than it could be eaten and chips stolen by opportunistic seagulls. Seaside holidays often reconnect us not only with places, but with earlier versions of ourselves. But perhaps there is something deeper happening as well.

The sea has always occupied a strange place in the human imagination. It can feel peaceful and threatening within the same moment. Calm water stretching into the horizon can inspire awe and tranquillity, while storms remind us how small and fragile human beings really are. Scripture recognises both dimensions; the sea frequently appears as a symbol of danger and uncertainty, yet it is also a place where people encounter the presence and power of God.

Several of Jesus' most memorable moments happen beside the water. Fishermen are called into discipleship while mending their nets. Crowds gather on shorelines to hear Him teach. Storms are calmed. Peter steps uncertainly out onto the waves. Even after the resurrection, Christ meets His disciples by the sea once again, cooking breakfast over a charcoal fire as dawn breaks along the shore.

Water, throughout the Bible, often becomes a place of transition. The Israelites pass through the Red Sea towards freedom. Baptism marks the beginning of new life. Rivers and seas repeatedly become locations where people leave one reality behind and move towards another.

Perhaps this helps explain why holidays can feel spiritually significant, even when we are not consciously thinking about faith. A break from ordinary routines creates space for reflection in ways daily life often does not permit. At home, our attention is constantly fragmented by responsibilities, schedules, emails,

errands and noise. Holidays interrupt that pattern. Time slows slightly, conversations become less hurried and we begin noticing things again.

The seaside especially seems to encourage this attentiveness. The rhythm of waves, the movement of tides and the vastness of open horizons all have a way of quietening the mind. Problems that felt overwhelming in the middle of a stressful week can appear differently when viewed from a long stretch of coastline beneath an open sky. That does not mean holidays magically solve life's difficulties. Many people carry grief, anxiety or exhaustion with them wherever they go. Yet stepping outside familiar routines can sometimes help us see our lives more clearly. Distance creates perspective.

Jesus Himself regularly withdrew from crowds and busy places. Luke's Gospel tells us that He "often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." These moments were not escapes from His mission, but part of how He sustained it. Solitude, rest and prayer formed an essential rhythm within His life.

Modern culture often struggles to understand rest properly, confusing it with laziness or self-indulgence, and many people feel guilty whenever they stop being productive. Even holidays can become exhausting exercises in optimisation, where every moment must be filled, photographed and shared online. Christianity offers a different understanding. Sabbath was never intended simply as the absence of work, but as the restoration of relationship: with God, with one another and even with ourselves. True rest allows human beings to remember that their worth does not depend entirely upon productivity.

The seaside lends itself naturally to this rediscovery of simplicity. Much of what people enjoy there is remarkably ordinary. Walking along the shore. Reading quietly in a deckchair. Watching children explore rock pools. Sitting beside the water with no particular urgency to be elsewhere. These moments may seem small, yet they carry a kind of quiet grace that busy life often obscures.

There is also something deeply democratic about beaches. The seaside tends to flatten social distinctions in amusing ways. Business executives, retirees, toddlers and teenagers all end up dressed similarly, splashed with too much sunscreen and trying unsuccessfully to keep sand out of sandwiches. The coast reminds people that they are creatures rather than carefully constructed identities, a reminder which can be spiritually healthy.

The Psalms frequently use creation to draw attention back to God:

"The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands." (Psalm 19:1)

Nature has a way of resetting perspective. Standing beside the sea often evokes a sense of scale that modern urban life can diminish. Human concerns remain real, but they no longer appear quite so all-encompassing. The horizon stretches beyond us. The tides continue arriving and retreating without our permission or control. All of which can feel strangely comforting. At the same time, the seaside also reminds us how much joy matters. Christianity is sometimes caricatured as suspicious of pleasure, yet Scripture consistently presents joy, celebration and delight as gifts from God. Jesus attended meals and celebrations, while the Kingdom of God is repeatedly described using the imagery of feasts and abundance.

Simple pleasures like holidays matter because human beings are not designed merely to survive. Delight forms part of faithful living. Ice cream on a warm afternoon may not seem especially theological, but gratitude rarely begins with abstract ideas. More often it grows through ordinary experiences received thankfully.

Of course, holidays eventually end. Back home suitcases must be unpacked, washing piles dealt with and alarm clocks reset. Yet perhaps part of the purpose of rest is not simply escape, but renewal. Good holidays remind us that life can be lived differently, and they restore perspective that ordinary routines gradually wear away.

The challenge, then, is not merely to enjoy moments of peace beside the sea, but to carry something of that attentiveness back into everyday life. To notice beauty more readily. To make space for rest before exhaustion becomes overwhelming. To remember that human worth is deeper than achievement.

Perhaps this explains why people continue returning to the coast year after year. The seaside offers more than entertainment or nostalgia. Somewhere beneath the deckchairs, fish and chips and amusement arcades lies a quieter longing: the desire to breathe more deeply, live more slowly and recover some sense of wonder. And standing at the shoreline, watching waves roll endlessly towards the land, many people discover that this longing may itself be pointing towards God.