

## **Sixteenth Sunday of the Year July 19, 2015**

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Ephesians 2:13-18; Mark 6:30-34

The Holy Bible constantly reminds us of the loving unbroken care of God towards human persons. He created everything for man and for his wellbeing. He sent his messengers constantly to look after his people. He is our Father, care taker and protector. The image of God as the shepherd of his people has a long tradition in the history of God's people. This image of the shepherd which appears several times in the New Testament shows us the care and concern of God in Jesus. We have the popular images of Jesus the Good Shepherd carrying a sheep over his shoulders, or we have a smiling Jesus sitting under a tree, with a little lamb on his lap. This image of the shepherd appeals to us because it shows the tenderness of Jesus and his compassion. A shepherd generally walked ahead of the sheep seeking out a safe path taking them to the pastures, water and shelter. The sheep followed him, because they recognized his voice, and they trusted him. An image of Jesus as a Good Shepherd is reassuring us that he is always our support on our journey through life. When we encounter difficulties in our life's path and face serious problems the presence of Jesus the Good Shepherd reassures us that we are not abandoned, that Jesus is supporting and holding us up. In the Gospel of today Jesus takes pity on the people and feels that they are like the sheep without Shepherd, indicating their helplessness. In the first reading the Prophet indicates that Judah is about to be punished and much of the blame is attributed to the leaders and kings. But God will raise up one who will be their true king. The second reading tells us that Christ by his death has brought unity and peace.

In the First Reading of today Prophet Jeremiah has strong words for shepherds or the leaders who had been irresponsible and who let their flocks be scattered and destroyed. In the ancient world kings often accepted the title shepherd and the subjects were sheep under their care. Here Jeremiah was addressing the religious leaders of his own time and told them that they did not recognize as rulers of God's people their first responsibility was to lead the people close to God. They did not recognize that kingship in the Promised Land had to be distinct from the kingship in the nations surrounding them. The Prophet therefore warned the leaders that if they did not change their policies the sheep would be scattered. However, because God has continued to be the true King and Shepherd of the people, even the ruling king Zedekiah's misguided policies cannot destroy the kingdom entirely. Now God promises to gather the remnant of his flock out of all the lands and to raise shepherds over them to protect them. Disappointed with the priestly branch of the Levites who were called to be the shepherds, God promised through the prophet that he himself would gather the remnant of his flock out of all the lands where he had driven them into exile and he would bring them back to the land flowing with milk and honey. At that time God will appoint for them a new king, a descendant of David who will rule by the standards of heaven. Unlike Zedekiah the new king will serve God first.

In the Second Reading of today Paul reminds the Ephesians converts that Jesus brought unity of brotherhood between the Jews and the Gentiles to form them into one family. Under the old dispensation a Jew could not associate with a Gentile. Now Christ has brought peace to all Jews and Gentiles who accept him as their master. He broke down the barrier that divided them, a barrier symbolized by a wall in the Temple. In fact, the Temple was a building of many walls, each one marking off limits beyond which certain people could not go. There was a wall for Gentiles, beyond that a wall for women, a wall for men, and a wall for priests. There was even a barrier into the Holy of Holies into which only the High Priest could go

once a year. By his dying and shedding his blood on the cross for the entire mankind, Jesus broke down hatred and divisiveness and created a New Person and a new family not based on blood, race, nationality, gender, or class but on the love of God. Those Gentiles are no longer outsiders but they belong to God's family. He has invited all to belong to one family, his family, with just one Father, where all are truly brothers and sisters. This is the healing which we most need to bring – to break down the walls of prejudice and help all to become one family. It is necessary that in the church there are Good shepherds, good pastors, all for the unity of the community. They are to remove all discord and division in communities.

In today's Gospel Mark very strongly brings out the compassion and human understanding of Jesus for man. The Gospel tells us that the disciples had just returned from a missionary journey. Jesus had sent them on a mission and they had been doing the same work as their Master. The Apostles had been busy carrying out their mission and ministry of healing and proclaiming the message of repentance. They had gone to proclaim the kingdom of God and had been inviting people to change their lives and prepare to enter the Kingdom. They were liberating people from the power of the evil one and did the healing by anointing people with oil. They did with authority of their master, what Jesus had been doing over the past two years. Now, obviously with some pride, they report back to Jesus all they had done. They would have told him all their activities, the miracles they worked, healing they did and the message they had taught. Here, we see their accountability, where the apostles render complete report to Jesus who had sent them with trust. From the tone of the passage one could conclude that they have been very successful in their mission. This is an ironic contrast to the experience of Jesus who had just been rejected by the people of his hometown, Nazareth. Nevertheless, the ministry was a challenging one and Jesus realizes the need for the Apostles to step out of the mainstream for a moment and rest. They were happy and probably at the same time tired and Jesus recognizes this easily. Jesus and the disciples were surrounded by crowds of people so that they did not even have time to eat. People came to them to listen to Jesus and receive his healing touch. Mark wants the readers to know how hungry the people were for the Word of God and its proclamation.

Mark tells us that Jesus showed great consideration towards the Apostles and suggested that they all go off to a quiet place to be by themselves alone. He invited them to retire to a desert place which in Mark indicates the symbolism of this place was both challenge and grace. One goes to the desert to rest and to be purified. Jesus would have done this withdrawal purposely, to give them some quiet time to reflect and pray on what they had experienced. It is something every person needs to do from time to time. They had worked hard and they deserved total rest to re-energize themselves. Jesus certainly felt they needed to be separated for a while to reflect on what they were really doing and where their 'power' really came from. He was so protective of them and so caring for them. No one had more important and urgent mission than Jesus. Yet he knew that important things cannot be accomplished without peace of mind. Jesus too would have needed that rest for in the absence of the Apostles he was working all alone. He himself was used to spend his time in quiet. The Gospels tell us that early mornings he went to pray and sometimes he spent the whole night in prayer. He wanted his friends also to have the same experience. While their attempt to escape to a desert place by boat was well intended, people are portrayed as those who wanted to follow them wherever they went.

The Gospels indicate that people all the time refused to leave them alone and they followed them. Maybe the disciples were highly disappointed as their day of rest had disappeared due to the crowds. Jesus now consoled the disciples and indicated that he too wanted to be with

them. Perhaps Jesus, too, was disappointed as it was he who brought the disciples out. After all, the idea of getting away was his. But, seeing the huge crowd, he was filled with compassion for them. When in the Scriptures we see Jesus often surrounded by crowds, we are not fully surprised as he was always a crowd puller, a person so attractive. The crowds and their over enthusiasm are characteristic of Mark's story telling style. The irony throughout the Gospel is that those closest to Jesus do not understand and accept him while the common people and outsiders do. The climax of the passage is when Jesus disembarks from the boat and sees the huge crowd assembled there at the place of landing. When Jesus observes the people awaiting them he sees them in a very profound way. He saw the crowds as helpless like sheep without a shepherd, people without direction, without guidance, hungry for words of light and meaning in their lives. They had no one to take care of them or protect them. Even though he was tired, Jesus immediately sat down and began to teach them. He was not worried of his personal welfare but cared more for the people. People were eager to listen to him. He spoke to them with an intensity and power that they had never before experienced.

Thus the desire of the crowds to see Jesus and hear him speak upset their plans. They had reached the place even before they arrived by boat. He could have sent them away but again his human compassion took over. Seeing their eagerness to hear the word of God he lets them stay. The imagery used here is very popular in the Bible namely the imagery of Shepherd. Mark tells of the observation made by Jesus that they were like the sheep without the shepherd. They were the persons who needed someone to take care of them, someone to teach them about God's love and concern. This imagery of shepherd in the Old Testament referred to the Leader of the people. The ancient Hebrews applied the metaphor of the shepherd also to God. God the creator in his love continues to reach out to his people to care for them like the good shepherd. He is there to protect them, lead them to good pastures and be there in their needs. The very reason why Jesus came to the earth was to establish the Kingdom of God and assume the Leadership. Jesus showed that he was moved with pity and compassion on these people wandering aimlessly like the people of ancient Israel in the desert. God had promised to take over the duties of the shepherd and now through the life and ministry of Jesus that promise was being fulfilled.

Today's Gospel picture gives joy to anyone who considers the measure of leadership to be popularity. Generally a leader is considered as one who knows the way, goes the way and shows the way. In the ordinary world, the type of leadership varies depending on the situation, be it political, military, institutional or sports. In Jesus we have a leader of unique type. He was a person who was people oriented with the human concern at the same time with divine understanding. He leads people by being with them and at the same time shows the way through his care and concern. Mark tells us that people were going and coming constantly and they had no time for anything even to eat. For Jesus the religious leader's life is a series of goings from the presence of people to the presence of God and back again. But he knew that there are dangers in each of the alternatives. One can spend too much time in the activities of people and thus gradually lose the vision of God. On the other hand one can go to God to escape the companionship of people. A good religious leader knows the middle way, being refreshed by God to offer something concrete to people and loving people enough to help them with their lives.

No matter what idea we have about a good leader we will see the total application of it in Jesus. To bring together people he gave his life on the cross and he asked his disciples to sacrifice self just like he did. By dying on the cross he broke all barriers and divisions in the

world and opened a new way for the church. Today the church is called upon to live this call to leadership and proclaim the message of love and service to all. Hence Jesus told his disciples that with him the leadership is combined with service and he washed the feet of his disciples to prove the type of leadership he practiced. We need to pray that our Church today that it may be truly effective, responsible and compassionate to all and show the leadership like Jesus. At the same time we need also to pray for other leaders in the world, including parents and teachers who are in many ways responsible for influencing the lives of others. There are the political leaders who have the responsibility to lead the people to achieve greater good. The Lord is our Good Shepherd who wishes to lead us in the right path. To follow the Lord we must be able to listen to him. From time to time at least we have to deliberately, sift the noise and distractions from our life and listen to the voice of the shepherd. Then we have no fear in our life in the face of any danger. We ask the Good Shepherd to care for us and ask for the grace that we may be his shepherds to carry out his mission.

It was a joyous occasion. Every member of the family and a host of special friends had gathered on the lawns of the bungalow to celebrate the parents' wedding anniversary. As would be expected, the mother had brought out her best crockery, reserved only for occasions such as these. There was a tray full of used tea-cups, made of fine china with exquisite designs on them, lying on a side table. The mother signalled one of her daughters and requested her to carry it over to the kitchen. The daughter immediately obliged, but in her hurry to get the job done, she missed a step while entering the house. The crockery spilled over the tray and crashed on the floor. The girl was stunned. Her mother would kill her now, she thought, shaking with nervousness. There were tears in her eyes as she quickly collected the broken bits into the tray and went to the kitchen. Though terrified, she decided that she had to tell her mother. Putting on a brave front she went up to her mother and confessed how she had broken the treasured crockery. To her utter surprise her mother remained calm. With a reassuring smile on her face she simply asked, "Are you hurt?" When she replied she wasn't, the mother said, "Then I'm not worried, dear. I can replace the crockery, but I can't replace you!"

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