



Welcome to our Eucharistic Celebration

# The Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

July 22, 2018

St. Mary of the Assumption Parish

## Today's Themes in Scripture

Long before, and during the time of Jesus, sheep were an important resource in Palestine and they had to be protected. Without the protection of a shepherd, sheep are vulnerable: they can become lost and die of thirst or starvation, or they could fall prey to robbers or wild animals. If a shepherd was neglectful or dishonest, the loss of sheep could have an impact on an employer's wealth or a family's survival. The shepherd's role was so vital and well understood, that people eventually began to evaluate their leaders as they would a shepherd. People would not thrive under a leader who was considered to be a bad shepherd. So the people of Jesus' time would have immediately understood what it meant when they heard Mark compare Jesus to a shepherd who was concerned for his people.

The action in today's Gospel is a continuation of the activities in last week's Gospel. The disciples, who were sent out by Jesus to preach the good news, have come back excited, tired, and hungry. Jesus is concerned for their physical and emotional well-being, so he suggests they go to a quiet place to eat and rest. When this plan is discovered, people from many towns gather to meet them. Although Jesus is concerned about those who have just returned, he is moved with pity for the crowd since they, unlike the disciples, have no shepherd to care for them. These "lost sheep" have come to Jesus for his teaching, so he gathers them together and continues to teach them about the kingdom of God.

The first and second readings add to our understanding of Jesus as shepherd. Speaking for God, Jeremiah reveals God's intention to send someone who will take better care of his people and shepherd them with wisdom and justice. St Paul describes Jesus gathering together in peace people who were once divided, reconciling them with God and each other. Today's familiar psalm speaks to the contentment and security of being guided, protected, and sustained by the attentive care of a good shepherd.

Too often, we fear God as a remote, demanding judge. Today's Scriptures challenge that false image. God never intended for us to be alone and vulnerable. In each of these descriptions of a good shepherd, we can find a truer understanding of God's loving plan for us in sending Jesus to be our shepherd.

## Sunday Readings and Background

### Reading I: Jeremiah 23:1-6

#### Woe to those who mislead their sheep.

- Preaching just before the Babylonian exile, Jeremiah warns the people that they will lose the land and be driven into exile unless they turn from their evil ways.
- The people do not turn from their evil ways. They and Zedekiah, their ruler, are taken into exile.
- The leaders of the exiled people, like good shepherds, kept the people united and nourished them with hope.

### Responsorial Psalm: Ps.23: 1-3, 3-4, 5-6

**The Lord is my Shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.**

### Reading II: Ephesians 2:13-18

#### He announced the Good News to those who were far off and to those who were near.

- The Letter to the Ephesians emphasizes the unity between Jews and Gentiles.
- All who are redeemed through Christ are one body in him.
- Christ is the way to peace for all people.

### Gospel: Mark 6:30-34

#### They went to a deserted place to rest.

- The disciples have just returned from their first missionary journey and Jesus knows that they need rest.
- The attempt to get away from the crowds is useless because the people are hungry to hear the word of God.
- Jesus, the Good Shepherd, responds to the people with compassion.

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# Shepherds the Word Needs

“Woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock!” This is a favorite theme of prophets, parishioners who are not happy with their pastors, and folks who want to bash the hierarchy or critique politicians who foment divisiveness. But pay attention! In today’s readings the role of critic belongs to God who then hands humanity the task of remediation.

Even our beloved Psalm 23, that promise of green pastures and restful waters, gives us precious little time to rest before God leads us along paths that include a long walk in a dark valley before we get to the Lord’s banquet table. Our shepherd has a mission in mind for us.

That’s the lesson brought home to the poor disciples whom Jesus invited on a getaway in today’s Gospel. They had just returned from their first foray into mission. They were so excited about all they had accomplished that they didn’t even mention that John the Baptist had been executed while they were on the road. That should have been a hint to them about the things to come, but maybe they were avoiding the topic on purpose.

Perhaps it was the combination of things — the apostles’ success, John’s death and the relentless crowds — that gave Jesus the idea they should hop a boat and disappear. Whatever his intention, it turned out to be a time of teaching. The obvious teaching was the “many things” that Mark tells us Jesus taught the crowds. More important was what he taught the disciples.

Mark tells the story in his typical stark style, leaving it to the readers to mine the wealth of meaning he hides in each phrase. The most telling sentence of this Gospel says that when Jesus saw the people looking for him “his heart was moved with pity ... for they were like sheep without a shepherd.”

The word translated as pity means that Jesus’ guts were wrenched as he saw them. This is like the feeling of parents who see their child in real pain. The people’s hunger, their heartfelt search, their longing for more, called Jesus forth. He allowed their need to turn him into a shepherd.

That was Jesus’ lesson for the disciples. Beyond anything words could explain, they saw how he identified with the needs that appeared before him. He was showing his followers that if they wanted to carry forth his mission, they had to feel the real needs of the people. Only then would they know what they had to offer.

Pope Francis explains this in *Evangelii Gaudium* (“Joy of the Gospel”) when he says that an evangelizing community gets involved in people’s daily lives, it bridges difference and is even willing to abase itself if necessary (EG #24). Lest we be too concerned for efficiency and our free time, Francis also reminds us that something lovers understand instinctively applies to our mission as well: “Evangelization consists mostly of patience and disregard for constraints of time” (ibid).

Jesus went off to rest with his disciples and, although he may not have planned it that way, their lost retreat turned into one of the most important and memorable times they spent with him. Jesus’ response to this crowd would lead to the great communion among the multitude that we will contemplate for the next few weeks, and it all began because Jesus saw that the people needed a shepherd.

Today’s readings won’t allow us to sit back and criticize our leaders. Instead, they invite us to look at what is lacking in our church and society and allow the hungers of our world to call us forth as the crowd called Jesus. One of the most beautiful texts from the Second Vatican Council states that “The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well” (*Gaudium et Spes* #1).

Christ’s followers must look at our world and ask what deep and truly human hopes and hungers are being unconsciously expressed in the blind competition of sports fans, the addictions that plague every strata of society, supremacy movements and all the isms that divide our people. Some political leaders benefit from discord and some religious figures make a fortune as they encourage us to wait for everything to be resolved in heaven. Neither the Gospel nor Vatican II supports such approaches.

Francis puts the call clearly when he says, “I hope that all communities will devote the necessary effort to advancing along the path of a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are” (EG #26). Gandhi said, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” Today’s liturgy tells us to become the shepherds our world needs.

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