

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Exodus 19:2-6a
<i>Response</i>	We are his people: the sheep of his flock.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 100:1-2, 3, 5
<i>Second Reading</i>	Romans 5:6-11
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 9:36-10:8

The 11th Sunday in ordinary time for Year, A, continues the Church's journey through the Gospel of Matthew. Here we come into Matthew, at the end of Matthew 9 and Matthew 10, with the famous mission discourse of Jesus, which he gives to the disciples, the Twelve, as he sends them out for the first time on a mission of proclaiming the kingdom of God. So the reading's going to begin with the prelude to the discourse in 9 verse 36, and then it's going to go down all the way to chapter 10, verse 8. So let's read that together:

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity. The names of the twelve apostles are these: first, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother; James the son of Zeb'edee, and John his brother; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out, charging them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And preach as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at

hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. You received without pay, give without pay."¹

Several things are worth noting here about this passage. The first one is that the mission discourse of Jesus is prompted by his seeing the crowds helpless and harassed "like sheep without a shepherd." This is a very important passage because it's an illusion to imagery that you'll find in several of the prophets in the Old Testament. Ezekiel is one that comes to mind that describes the people of Israel like a flock of sheep who are supposed to be being led by their shepherds, but who are in fact being abused by their shepherds or fleeced by their shepherds in the sense that their money's being taken from them, their stuff is being stolen from them, and they are not being led to God precisely by the people who are supposed to lead them to God in the Old Testament, namely, the priests in the temple.

So it's interesting that Jesus here sees the people in need of leadership and of course he himself will say elsewhere, he'll speak of himself as a shepherd. Like later in the gospel he'll say, "Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered," in the garden of Gethsemane. In the Gospel of John, he'll say, "I am the good shepherd." But in this case, Jesus appoints the Twelve in response to this need for leadership amongst the people of Israel that he sees and compares to a flock of sheep in need of a shepherd. So that's the first thing to highlight here, is that the apostolic ministry and the apostolic mission flows from Jesus's recognition that the people are going to need leadership. So to this day, at the risk of getting ahead of myself, I'll just point this out, that the bishops in the Catholic Church who are the successors of the Apostles will often have the bishop's crook, the bishop's staff, which is symbolic of their identity as a shepherd. And it doesn't mean that Jesus isn't the shepherd. You can't ask the question, who's the shepherd of the Church? Is it the bishops or is it Christ? Well, the answer is both, right? They are shepherds who are sent by the one shepherd, the supreme shepherd who is of course Christ himself. So that's the first imagery point there.

A second image is this image of the harvest being plentiful, but the laborers being few. So here the image shifts. Now it's not a flock of sheep in need of shepherds. It's a harvest in need of laborers, in need of harvesters, in need of reapers to go out and harvest the fruits of the field, harvest the grain of the wheat. And so in that context, the need for the harvest to take place, Jesus calls the Twelve to him and he

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

sets them apart from his other followers and gives them authority. The Greek word here is *exousia*, and it can also be translated as power. It's the same word that is used to describe Jesus' teaching earlier in the Gospel of Matthew at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, when the people say, "He taught as one having authority." Or he taught with power, there was a power in his words, an authority in his words. Well, the very authority that Jesus himself possesses when he speaks the Sermon on the Mount, he then gives to Matthew and Thomas and Andrew and James and John and Judas, the Twelve, who are chosen to be his emissaries, chosen to act as shepherds on behalf of him as the messianic shepherd of God in leading the people into the kingdom of God. So the Twelve Apostles are not just Jesus's closest friends, they're not just the followers that were particularly intimate with him and close to him amongst the multitudes. No, no, no. He gives them *exousia*. They have a share in his own authority and it's through that *exousia*, through that authority that they are able not just to proclaim the kingdom of God, but to shepherd people into it, to go out and harvest, so to speak, to participate in the harvest of souls that Jesus is calling for with the coming of the kingdom.

So this is the first co-missioning of the Twelve, and we could go into all kinds of interesting studies of each of these figures of the Twelve Apostles. For our purposes here, I would just want to highlight something about the list that's peculiar to the list of the Apostles in the New Testament. Every time you'll get a list of the Apostles names in the gospels, there are a couple of variations between the names between gospels, because as we've seen elsewhere, Jews will often have more than one name, so that's not a big deal. But the point that's interesting is Simon Peter is always listed first and Judas Iscariot is always listed last. So there's a hierarchy within the list itself that points to Peter's role as the chief representative of the Twelve and effectively the leader of the Twelve Apostles. And of course, it points to Judas' role, his ignominious role, as the traitor among the Twelve who will eventually be replaced by Mathias in the Book of Acts in order to reconfigure the number to fill the number of the Twelve, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, which is the next point I want to make. Why Twelve?

Well, if you know anything about the Old Testament that there are twelve sons of Jacob and twelve tribes of Israel in the Book of Exodus at the time of Moses. The number twelve is the constitutive number for the people of Israel. When you see the number twelve, think twelve tribes of Israel, think people of Israel. So when Jesus chooses the Twelve to be his twelve students and gives them authority, in a first century Jewish context, this is very important. It would imply that Jesus isn't just the long awaited Messiah or the long awaited king of Israel. It also implies that Jesus is constituting around himself a new Israel with new tribal leaders, new

patriarchs whose *exousia*, whose authority is not going to flow from their blood lineage with relationship to Jacob. You know, are you descended from one of the sons of Jacob? But rather, will flow from their relationship to Jesus who has now given them an *exousia* that is independent of their genealogy.

In fact, sometimes I'll have students say, "Dr. Pitre, have you ever looked into whether each of the Twelve apostles is descended from one of the twelve tribes?" So there's like a bloodline descent, and I understand the inclination. It would be really cool if each Apostle was from one of the twelve tribes of Israel, but I actually think the fact that they're not, because I mean there are several pairs of brothers, or at least couple pairs of brothers, Peter and Andrew being the obvious example. There's no indication that they're descended from each of the twelve tribes. And that actually might be the point, to show that in the new Israel that Jesus is constituting around himself, what's going to matter is not the blood of Jacob but the blood of Christ, because it's going to be these same Twelve who later in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus gathers around himself and gives his blood under the appearance of wine and his body under the appearance of bread and will say to them, "You twelve will sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel." So they are connected to the twelve tribes, but it's not genealogically like the Old Testament, it's eschatologically through the new covenant. So again, something to think about, the Church isn't just an institution, it is the new people of Israel. It's the new constitution, so to speak, of Israel around Christ. And the Twelve are at the head of it. They're the font of it, they're the shape of it. Just like the twelve sons of Jacob were the constitutive body for the people of Israel.

What about the mission? So Jesus sends these Twelve out and he charges them, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans." Wow. Okay. So Jesus doesn't like Gentiles and he doesn't like Samaritans apparently, Right? No, wrong. Although people can understandably be a little confused by and even maybe a little scandalized by that particular passage, it's very easily explained when we recall that there is an order to the mission of the Gospel. For example, if you read Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter one, Paul will talk about the fact that in God's plan of salvation, there's a certain order that can be summarized as follows: to the Jew first, then also to the Greek, right? So in bringing the good news of salvation, the Apostles are going to be commissioned not to go into all the Earth proclaiming the Gospel to all nations. That'll be after the resurrection. But during the ministry of Jesus, there's going to be a focus first and foremost on the lost sheep of the house of Israel. It would be unfitting to pass over the chosen people of God to start bringing the message to the Gentiles and the Samaritans before you've even brought it to the people of the Messiah himself, namely the

twelve tribes of Israel, the descendants of Jacob. And so when he says, "Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," he's effectively giving them an evangelical order, meaning the order in which the Gospel is preached, that will continue into the early church. You'll see this over and over again, for example, in the Book of Acts. When Paul brings the gospel to a new city, he goes first to the synagogue, and then from the synagogue he goes out to the Gentiles. The same thing's true during the apostolic mission. During Jesus' earthly life, the Apostles will be sent first to the lost sheep of the House of Israel, and then after the resurrection, they'll be sent out to the nations, to the Jew first, then also to the Greek.

And once they're sent out, what is their main message? The kingdom of heaven is at hand. So they're going to recapitulate the same message that Jesus was doing earlier in the Gospel of Matthew. So when Jesus goes out, one of the first words out of his mouth, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Then he heals the sick, he raises the dead, he cleanses lepers, he casts out demons. So the Apostles here are emissaries of Christ insofar as they're going to say the same words that Jesus said and do the same things that Jesus did. They will be, as we use today when speaking of priests, an *alter Christus*, another Christ, is precisely their role in carrying out their apostolic mission. They're not sent out to say anything or do anything that Jesus himself didn't already do or say, but rather to bring the good news, both the oral good news and also the good news of the miracles that they're performing out into the people of Israel among the lost sheep of the house of Israel, so that the prophets and the words of the prophets might see their fulfillment, first and foremost with the Israelites themselves.

So that's just a little overview here of the mission discourse. A very powerful...and I would encourage you if you're thinking about this passage, to go and take a peek at the Book of Acts, if you want to see this, it's fascinating. Read through the Acts of the Apostles with the life of Jesus in mind. And one of the things you'll notice is Peter and Paul will frequently do and say things that are parallel to what Jesus Himself has said in the gospels. They are recapitulating in their own lives and mission the words and life of Christ.

The Old Testament reading for today, the background of this one is very simple, it's just a passage from Exodus 19. If you had any doubts about the importance of the twelve tribes, just read the first reading for today because it's about the twelve tribes at the foot of Mount Sinai. And it says something very significant. It says:

when they

meaning the Twelve tribes

set out from Reph'idim and came into the wilderness of Sinai, they encamped in the wilderness; and there Israel encamped before the mountain.

It means before Mount Sinai.

And Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine...

And here's the key line:

and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

What does that mean? It means that the twelve tribes are set apart not just to be God's chosen people, although they are that, not just to be a holy nation, although they are that too, right? Holy means set apart. They're supposed to be a kingdom of priests, which means that their principle mission is to worship God. Israel, in a sense, in the Old Testament, are supposed to be the liturgical leaders of the whole human race. Just like Israel is the firstborn son, God says, and the rest of the nations are his younger children, so Israel is the kingdom of priests who are meant to lead the other nations of the world into the worship of the one true God. So just like there are twelve tribes that are a kingdom of priests in the Old Testament, so too in the New Testament, Jesus is going to choose the Twelve Apostles to be the new priests of the new covenant. So the Old and New Testament here, although Jesus doesn't use the word priests in the Gospel of Matthew 10, implicitly by making them the Twelve leaders of the twelve tribes of the New Israel and giving them *exousia*, he's effectively preparing them to become the priests of the new covenant, which they will fully enter into, of course, at the Last Supper, when he commands them to offer the sacrifice of the new covenant, which is his body and is his blood.

The responsorial psalm for today, Psalm 100, is a very simple bridge between the old New Testament because it uses the imagery in verse three of being the flock of God, the people of God who are the flock of God. So it continues this imagery of

God as a shepherd and his people as a flock. So I'll close with a line from the living tradition here. In his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, Saint Thomas Aquinas, the great common Doctor of the Church and the great medieval commentator on scripture, has this to say about the imagery of the Twelve and the relationship between the mission of the Twelve and the Gentiles. He writes these words:

Why does it say “twelve”? That the conformity of the New and Old Testament might be shown, because in the Old, there were twelve patriarchs, and these are likewise twelve.²

And Why does he say, “do not go into the way of the Gentiles?” One should say that they were sent to both, because first they were sent to the Jews... Wishing to lead the faithful into the faith of the fathers, he wished first that the faith should be preached to the Jews...³

So there we see very clearly everything I just told you, Saint Thomas already anticipated this. The reason there are Twelve apostles in the New Testament is because there were twelve patriarchs in the old. And the reason Jesus says, "Don't go among the Gentiles," is not because the Gentiles have been rejected for salvation, but because in the order of salvation, the Apostles are going to be sent first to the tribes of Israel and then to the nations, so that the gospel might spread from Jesus to the Apostles, to the ends of the earth.

² Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on Matthew no. 810.

³ Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on Matthew no. 815.