

The Sixteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Jeremiah 23:1-6
<i>Response</i>	The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 23:1-3, 3-4, 5, 6
<i>Second Reading</i>	Ephesians 2:13-18
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	My sheep hear my voice, says the Lord; I know them, and they follow me.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 6:30-34

The Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year B continues the journey of the church through the Gospel of St. Mark. In this Sunday's gospel we pick up in the aftermath of Jesus having sent the apostles out on their mission. So it's a short gospel today but it's rich as always. So let's begin in Mark 6:30-34 and see what the church has for us today:

The apostles returned to Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a lonely place by themselves. Now many saw them going, and knew them, and they ran there on foot from all the towns, and got there ahead of them. As he went ashore he saw a great throng, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.¹

Okay, very short gospel today but there's a lot going on here that is worthy of our attention. I just want to walk through it step-by-step. The first point is just one of

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.

context. When it says that the apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught, this is the aftermath, it's the wake of them having gone on their first mission. So you might recall from a previous study of the earlier section in Mark 6, Jesus sends the apostles out on mission, he tells them to go out two by two, in pairs, to proclaim the kingdom of God, to cast out demons, and also to anoint the sick, to perform miracles of healing. So in the wake of that first apostolic mission they've returned to Jesus and they're telling him, they're giving him you know a point by point of all that they had done and all that they had taught. In the wake of that Jesus says something interesting, he says to them come away and rest a while, right. And I think that this first point is significant because it just shows the humanity of Jesus and the apostles. They are engaged in missionary work; they are proclaiming the most important thing that they could devote their lives to, which is the coming of the kingdom of God. And at the same time they need rest; they need to recuperate; they need to be renewed in body and mind and spirit. So he tells them they need to come away from the crowds and rest for a while, because the response to the apostles proclamation of the gospel is overwhelming. They're being thronged by the crowds; they're being overrun by the crowds. People are so ecstatic about what they're hearing and what they're seeing that they are basically mobbing not just Jesus but also the apostles themselves, so that they don't even have enough time to eat their lunch, to eat their supper, right, to even take a break to get food.

So I think this is important for us to see, just on a human level, not only the apostles need rest but also the fact that evidently the early gospel, the early proclamation of the good news was something that people got excited about, something that was mesmerizing, something that was breathtaking. It made people not just talk about the event but they wanted to go, they wanted to hear, they wanted to hang on every word that the apostles were saying. They were so excited about it that they did not even give them the leisure to eat. These crowds that formed were massive. Now what happens is they tried to escape, they try to get away from the crowd and they can't do it, because once people know what they look like it's over. So the apostles now begin to become, so to speak, "famous," in other words, known by site even during Jesus' public ministry. So I also think that's an important point to remember, that the apostolic mission of the 12 doesn't start after the resurrection, it doesn't wait until after the resurrection to begin; Jesus is

already training the apostles to proclaim the gospel during his lifetime, during his public ministry and they become known by face and by sight.

Now the third aspect of this text is probably the most important one, which is once Jesus sees this phenomena, once he sees the crowds, the mobs, the fact that the apostles aren't even getting a chance to eat because people want to hear the gospel, because people want to be healed, because people want to have demons cast out of them, when he sees that taking place he's moved to have compassion on them, right. His response to that is not annoyance but rather compassion because "they were like sheep without a shepherd." And that's really the key line of this particular gospel, like sheep without a shepherd. Because in that verse, as we're going to see in a second, Mark is alluding to the Old Testament. He's alluding to prophecies in the Old Testament that depict the coming Messiah not just as a prophet who proclaims the word of God, not just a priest who offers perfect sacrifice, and not even just as a king who's going to lead his people and govern them, but as a shepherd who's going to guard them and protect them and feed them, right, a so-called Shepherd Messiah. A number of scholars have done works on the theme of the Shepherd Messiah in the Old Testament, but in this context I just want you to notice here, when Jesus is moved to have compassion on the crowd, what's his principle response? It says that he began to teach them many things. The Greek word there is *didaskō*, we get the noun *didachē* from that which is a name of one of the earliest Christian documents that we have outside the New Testament, *The Didache of the Twelve Apostles* literally means the doctrine or the teaching of the Twelve Apostles.

So notice when Jesus sees the crowd lost, his first response is to tell them the truth, is to teach them the truth, because he recognizes that what these people are ultimately hungering for, what they're getting out of their homes and leaving their work and leaving their places of employment and their families to come and listen to is the truth, it's the good news, it's the attractiveness of the kerygma, the proclamation of the gospel. I don't want to get into applications, contemporary applications, too quickly but it is at least worth noting that today if you were to say to someone, oh I want to tell you about Christianity, some people might think they already know about it and quite frankly they find it boring, right. They're not going to go to some great distance to hear the good news or to hear the gospel preached.

And so if that's the case, if people are responding to the gospel today with apathy or lack of interest, it makes you wonder what's the difference between the gospel the apostles were preaching and the gospel as it's being preached today. If we're preaching the gospel authentically, if we're giving the fullness of the gospel, we should be getting the same responses that people were having in the First Century A.D. Now don't get me wrong, there are always going to be people who reject the good news. This happens to Christ, we'll see this eventually, he's going to get crucified. It happens in his own town of Nazareth, we saw that earlier, that there were, you know, in his own hometown there was hardness of heart. But by in large the response to the gospel was excitement, curiosity, interest and it drew massive crowds, with just their teaching, just their proclamation and their preaching.

So in short then Jesus here in Mark 6 is being depicted as the Shepherd Messiah, who is a teaching Messiah. That's very important. He is not just a prophet, priest, or king, but a teacher as well, a shepherd who's going to lead the people to the truth. And in that light we can now go back to the Old Testament because the readings for today are chosen with the theme of Jesus' identity as the shepherd in mind. In this case the first reading for today's mass is from the Book of Jeremiah 23:1-6, and a good case can be made that when Mark uses the language of sheep without a shepherd that he's specifically alluding to this particular oracle of Jeremiah. Because in this oracle Jeremiah is going to describe the leaders of Israel, the priests of Israel, for example, as bad shepherds, as wicked shepherds, as shepherds who are leading the people astray and abusing them rather than teaching them, and feeding them, and caring for the flock. So if your recall, just to put it in context, Jeremiah the prophet was a priest in the Temple in the Sixth Century B.C., around 587, around the time of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonians, right before the great exile of the southern tribes to Babylonia in what is known as the Babylonian exile or the Babylonian deportation. So one of the things Jeremiah had the privilege of doing was being the prophet who was chosen to go to a very wicked generation of leaders and tell them they were wicked, call them to repentance, and tell them that if they didn't repent and change God was going to come and destroy the temple and bring them into exile, which made him one of the most loathed prophets of the Old Testament by the leaders of his day. He was persecuted and eventually, according to Jewish tradition, he was

martyred, he was stoned to death. In any case, Jeremiah 23 is his prophecy against the shepherds of Israel, against the wicked leaders of Israel, and this is what it says:

"Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" says the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: "You have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing," says the LORD. "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'"

Okay, there's a lot going on in that oracle. So short gospel for today but a rich Old Testament prophecy, so let's just kind of walk through it and break it down. Number one, when Jeremiah refers to the shepherds of Israel who are wicked and leading the people astray, he's in all likelihood referring to the chief priest and the elders in the Jerusalem Temple. There's lots of evidence in the rest of Jeremiah for that to be the case. So what he's saying is these religious leaders of the Jewish people, instead of acting as shepherds and guiding the flocks to, you know, good pasture, water, what not, leading them to the truth and to right worship, they've actually scattered the flock, they've driven them away and they've not cared for them. So what is he referring to there? Well you have to know the history of Israel. If you look at the history of Israel you'll recall that not only was there the Babylonian exile in 586 B.C. that I mentioned earlier, but a couple hundred years before that in 722 B.C. there was the Assyrian exile. The Assyrian exile, according to the Old Testament, was the result of the sin of the leaders of Israel who split away. They divided the kingdom into two kingdoms, a northern kingdom consisting of 10 tribes of Israel — the northern tribes were tribes like Ephraim and

Manasseh, Issachar, Zebulun, Naphtali, tribes we're not as familiar with but they were up in the area we now know as Galilee. So those 10 tribes broke away from the two southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin and they formed their own kingdom around 922 B.C., right after the death of Solomon, and their religious leaders did not shepherd them rightly. They led them into idolatry and into sin and eventually the Assyrians came along and as a result of Israel's sin destroyed the northern kingdom and brought them into exile. In other words, the shepherds led the sheep astray and the flock of those 10 northern tribes were scattered to the four winds. That's what Jeremiah is referring to here.

However, what Jeremiah then says in verse, the third verse there, is that God himself is going to act as the true shepherd and he's going to gather the remnant of his flock out of all the countries where he has driven them and bring them back to their fold so that they can be fruitful and multiply. Okay what is that talking about? Well this is a prophecy of what was known as the return of the lost tribes of Israel. The idea that runs throughout the Old Testament prophets, that despite the fact that those 10 northern tribes have been scattered and mixed among the Gentile nations, that God would gather the remnant, that he would gather the remnant of those, the northern kingdom, and somehow, someday bring them back to the promised land, right. Here Jeremiah is using the image, or God through Jeremiah is using the image of a shepherd. In other words, if the leaders can't be a good shepherd, God himself will come and shepherd his people. He will gather the scattered sheep and bring them back to the fold, bring them back to the promised land out of all the countries where he has scattered them — and that's another clue that this is the Assyrian exile because unlike the Babylonian exile where the Jews just went to Babylon, the Assyrian exile scattered them amongst the various Gentile nations of the surrounding region, right.

The third element here that's interesting about this prophecy is that not only is God going to act as shepherd but he's going to set up new shepherds over the people, plural, right. It's not just one shepherd, there are going to be multiple shepherds who will care for the sheep so that the sheep don't fear anymore, and no longer are they going to get lost, they're not going to go astray anymore. Well this passage is fascinating because, prophetically here, what this is pointing forward to is the mission of the apostles themselves in the Gospel of Mark. So that's the link

between this Old and New Testament text. Not only is Jesus the Shepherd Messiah. Not only is he the divine shepherd who has come to gather his flock, but he's also going to appoint new shepherds, new religious leaders who will lead the people into the truth, will teach them righteousness and justice, and who will gather the flock with him, right. So it was never meant, this is important, the church was never meant to be an institution in which Jesus alone reigned without any appointed leaders over the people. From the very beginning Jesus establishes what we might call a hierarchy of shepherds, namely the apostles, who are going to share his authority and rule over the people and also evangelize the people, and teach the people, and heal the people, and that's what Jeremiah is talking about here. Basically he's describing a new priesthood, because the shepherds, if the wicked shepherds of the Old Testament were priests and they were, then guess what the new good shepherds of the new covenant are going to be, they're going to be priests as well.

Now if you're a Jew reading this prophecy you might be thinking well when's all this going to take place? I want to know when this is going to happen. Well it's going to happen at the time of the Messiah, and that's the next element there. God says behold the days are coming when the Lord says I will raise up for David a righteous branch and he will reign as a king and deal wisely and execute justice and righteousness. So anytime you see the language of David in the prophecies of the Old Testament it's a reference to the Davidic king, which is the anointed one, in Hebrew *mashiach*, in Greek *Christos*, namely the Messiah, the anointed king of Israel. So what God is saying here is that this is going to happen at the time of the coming of the Messiah, and you can see this in the next verse. Most of us will blow past this but it's really important, in his days, in other words at the time of the Messiah, Judah will be saved and Israel will dwell securely, in other words, dwell in the land. Now for years when I would read that kind of a prophesy in the Old Testament I just assumed Israel and Judah were two ways of saying the same thing, just talking about the Jewish people, but that's incorrect, it's not right. In the Old Testament after the Assyrian exile, after the breakdown of the kingdom of Israel into two kingdoms, the North and the South in 922 B.C., whenever you see the word Israel and Judah juxtaposed with one another, Israel is a reference to the ten northern tribes of the northern kingdom which called itself Israel and Judah is a reference to the two southern tribes of the southern kingdom which called itself

Judah, right. So what happened in 922 B.C. was that the ten tribes and the two tribes split into two kingdoms. But what God is saying is that in the time of the Messiah I'm going to bring them back together again, I'm going to restore them, so that both Judah, the two southern tribes, the southern kingdom will be saved, and Israel, the ten northern tribes that were scattered among the Gentiles, they're going to be brought back and they're all going to be one flock, one fold, and one shepherd.

Actually Jeremiah doesn't say that here but Ezekiel will say that elsewhere. Some of the other prophets make that really explicit. I think that's in Ezekiel 36, actually it might be Jeremiah 30 and 31 as well, the idea of one flock, one shepherd, one fold is an image for the restoration of the 12 tribes of Israel. That's what the Jews are waiting for; that's what Jeremiah's speaking about, the future restoration of all 12 tribes under one righteous shepherd, under one righteous king. So who is that? It's Jesus obviously, but what Mark's doing in the gospel reading for today is revealing to us that Christ is the long-awaited shepherd Messiah and that the crowds of people who are coming to hear the apostles and to hear him preach are the scattered flock of God being gathered together once more. That's why when Jesus sees them he has compassion, he is moved to teach them the truth because for centuries now they've lacked good shepherds; they've lacked the one shepherd who was going to come and reunite them and bring them back to God, and that's Christ himself.

It also reveals though too that if he's going to act as the Shepherd Messiah then the apostles are the new shepherds, in the plural, right, his appointed leaders. They were the new priests of this new Israel, this new covenant that he's gathering around himself. And if you have any doubt about that, just ask yourself how many apostles did he choose in Mark 6. Just a few verses earlier he picks 12, there's a reason for that. Any First Century Jew seeing Jesus walking around Israel with "the 12" as a reference to his 12 apostles would say, uh hey I know what you mean by that symbolism, but you know as well as I do that 10 of those 12 tribes scattered to the four winds, they're lost among the nations. How are you going to gather the scattered flock of Israel back together again when 10 of those tribes are lost? What is this 12 that you supposedly are bringing into fulfillment around yourself? And the answer is we'll see eventually that they're going to begin with the flock of

Israel in the land, but once Christ is resurrected he's going to say now go to the four winds and gather all the nations, and by gathering all the nations to which Israel was scattered God will in effect bring also the descendants of all the northern tribes back into the one fold which would be the church, right, the new Israel of God. That's the prophecy that's being fulfilled here. It's powerful and it's important because it shows that the very conversion of the Gentile nations is itself a kind of fulfillment of the prophecy of the gathering of the 10 scattered tribes of Israel who were lost among the Gentile nations. I mean I could be a descendent of an Israelite tribe, you could be a descendant. We don't know where they ended up, where their bloodline was because it was mixed with the Gentiles. So if you want to get the Israelites you have to bring the Gentiles in too and Jesus will do that in the great commission.

Alright, finally here for today the Psalm. The Responsorial Psalm is also about Christ, the Shepherd Messiah, and it's probably the most famous Psalm, it's definitely the most famous Psalm in the Bible, which is Psalm 23. We tend to be familiar with this because it's one of the few pieces of scripture that still makes it into movies and films, usually in funeral scenes because this Psalm will frequently be recited at a funeral service, the famous Psalm 23, the Lord is my shepherd. So I know you probably know the Psalm, it's familiar but let's read it and I just want to hit a couple of elements to highlight that will help you see how it connects the Old and the New Testaments and how it was read in ancient Christianity. So Psalm 23:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want;
he makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil;
for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff,
they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me

in the presence of my enemies;
thou anointest my head with oil,
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life;
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
for ever.

Okay, so just a couple of quick points. First, note the divinity of the shepherd, very important. In Jeremiah God says he's going to act as a shepherd in Psalm 23, the Lord, right. The Hebrew name for God is my shepherd and therefore in the gospel when Jesus is depicted as a shepherd it's not just a revelation of his Messiah-ship, it's also implying that he is the divine Shepherd Messiah, he's God himself come to gather his people.

A second element here that I think is interesting is just a cultural element in verse four there. When it says your rod and your staff they comfort me, the literal sense of the text which is attributed to David, David the shepherd who knows what shepherding is about, he's describing how God protects him and comforts him. He uses this image of thy rod and thy staff, and we might think that's just two ways of saying the same thing, but actually those are two different things. So in Hebrew the term for the rod is for a blunt instrument that was a weapon that the shepherd would use to beat off predators of the sheep. So it was carried in his belt and it was a heavy blunt instrument that he would use to defend himself. So the rod is a weapon for killing predators, right. The staff is different, it's a walking stick. And it was also used to guide the sheep and the shepherd would use his staff to knock olives out of the plentiful olive trees in the holy land to feed the sheep, okay. So they're two different images here. The rod protects the sheep from evil, from enemies, and the staff guides the sheep and feeds the sheep. So both those elements are part of God's divine shepherding. He is there both to protect us from evil, to protect us from our enemies, to kill all those, so to speak, the predators that would come after us. You can think here of the spiritual warfare. You'll see the Psalms interpreted in terms of spiritual warfare or spiritual enemies in the Church, that God defends us and destroys those enemies, but also the spiritual nourishment to lead the sheep to still waters, but also to feed them and to guide them. So it's

beautiful images there that both the rod and the staff give comfort to David, because God does both those things for his sheep.

And then finally the part I want to highlight the most here, which is interesting, is that David is describing how, on the literal level, that God the Lord prepares a table for him, right. In other words, that God provides what he needs: he gives him oil to anoint his head, he gives him wine to drink out of the cup, and that the goodness and mercy of God brings abundance into his life. That's on the literal level of the Psalm. However by placing this Psalm between Jeremiah 23 and Mark 6, the church also is inviting us to think about how Christ the divine shepherd fulfills this prophecy, how Christ leads the flock, how Christ leads his sheep, how Christ feeds his sheep, right. So what does he do? Well he protects them by teaching them the truth, protects them from error. But also we'll see in his public ministry by literally delivering them from Satan, from the demonic, from the forces of evil in the world, he also feeds them by teaching them the truth, giving them the gospel and ultimately he's going to feed them with the gift of himself in the Eucharist. And I think it's interesting that that's how the Psalm has always been read in the history of the church, as a kind of prophecy of the sacraments and of the Eucharist in particular.

So just a couple of quotes to end here from the living tradition that I think are interesting. Along those lines, St. Ambrose in his book *On the Sacraments* says this:

“How often have you heard Psalm 23 and not understood it! See how it is applicable to the heavenly sacraments”²

In other words, when we talk about the Lord preparing a table for me we're not just talking about earthly food, we're also talking about, and above all talking about, the table of the Eucharist, the Lords table.

And Eusebius of Caesarea who also lived in the Fourth Century, although early Fourth Century, said something similar. He says this:

² *On the Sacraments* 5.3.13; trans. R. J. Deferrari 1963, p.312

As we have received a memorial of this offering that we celebrate on *a table* by means of symbols of his body and saving blood according to the laws of the new covenant, we are taught again by the prophet David to say, “You have prepared a table before me...” (Psalm 23:5) Here plainly the mystic chrism and the holy sacrifices of Christ’s table are meant...³

That’s Eusebius’ *Proof of the Gospel*. So Eusebius sees even more. He says that when David says you prepare a table before me, he’s talking about the Eucharist, right, my cup overflows with the blood of Christ. But he also sees a sign of confirmation, which in ancient Christianity was called Chrismation, or the sacred chrism, the anointing with oil, because when David speaks about being anointed with oil, Eusebius is saying that that is also prophetic, pointing forward to the sacred chrism of early Christian anointing, what we call today the sacrament of Confirmation. So what does Christ do through these sacraments? Well through the sacrament of Confirmation he gives us the strength to proclaim the gospel, which is what the apostles are doing in the reading for today, they’re proclaiming the gospel. And then in the sacrament of the Eucharist he feeds us with his body and blood; he acts as the ultimate shepherd giving us the ultimate food which is his body, his blood, his soul, and his divinity itself.

And last but not least, I’ve skipped over this on accident but I would just bring it to your attention. For all those out there, especially any priests and deacons, anyone engaged in a kind of ministry, I think it’s also important to highlight that in this text Jesus recognizes that the apostles, the first ministers of the new covenant, not only need to engage in ministry but they need to rest; they need to take time to rejuvenate, to renew their spirit. And it’s interesting that Venerable Bede, who was one of the last of the early church fathers writing in England, said this in his commentary on Mark’s gospel:

[P]eople of whom the word of faith and the saving ministry is demanded in season and out of season have an incentive to meditate on heavenly things so as not to contradict what they teach by what they do.⁴

³ Eusebius, *Proof of the Gospel*, 1.10.39; trans. W. J. Ferrar 1920, pp.60-61

⁴ Bede, *Commentary on Mark’s Gospel*; trans. E. Barnecutt, p. 100

In other words, what Bede is saying there is that if you're engaged in ministry, it's tempting to fall into a kind of activism where you think that the way you live as a Christian is just to keep ministering, preaching, teaching, preaching, teaching, and to fall into a pattern of always engaging in some kind of activity and not taking time, not just to rest, but to meditate, to contemplate, to pray in other words. There are a lot of ministers out there who we could say are overworked and underprayed and that's a danger that Christ himself doesn't allow the apostles to fall into. He tells them come away to a lonely place, get away from the crowd, get away from the parish, whatever it is, and rest a while. Not just in leisure, although that's important, but also in a wholesome and holy rest that involves prayer and meditation on the mysteries so that when you go out again to proclaim the mysteries you're not an empty preacher of something that you yourself don't try to live and try to contemplate. I think that's a salutary admonition for all those who are engaged in any kind of ministry in the church.