

Readings for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

21st July 2024

First Reading: Jeremiah 23:1-6

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 shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.

The days are surely 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 live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'

Second Reading: Ephesians 2:11-22

Remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision"—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Gospel: St Mark 6:30-34,53-56

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves 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 deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

A Reflection for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

There is a musical term, *passionato*, which is an instruction to play or sing the passage marked in a passionate manner, with feeling, perhaps even with a touch of pathos. I am sure we can imagine the type of music that it might be applied to. I was reminded of it when thinking about the word *compassion* from today's Gospel passage. Both come from the same Latin root, *passio*, which means 'to suffer', *compassion* literally meaning 'to suffer with'. Compassion is a concern for the sufferings of others, but it is more than just a sympathetic pity; to be compassionate is to also feel the need, a compulsion even, to do something to reduce that suffering.

Compassion is a word that links our readings from Jeremiah and Mark today. In the Gospel, the people are described as being like sheep without a shepherd, and Jesus goes on to show how to treat people as a good shepherd would. In this passage, Mark is showcasing another aspect of Jesus' ministry, after the earlier demonstrations of divine power and of his role as a prophet, gradually building up the picture for his audience of Jesus as the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah.

In the book of Jeremiah, the prophet had been challenging the religious orthodoxies of the time. The religious and political leaders, those who should have been shepherds to the people, had thought that Jerusalem was specially blessed by God. Jeremiah had called the leaders to task, telling them that God was displeased with their divisions and injustices. He had pointed out that Shiloh, an ancient centre of worship, was once thought of as specially blessed, yet now lay in ruins. His warnings came to naught and, by the time of today's passage, Jerusalem had also been destroyed and many of the people taken into exile in Babylon.

Yet, despite this desperate situation, Jeremiah was able to hold out hope to the people. In this passage, he says that, even though the flock have been scattered, they will be restored. Speaking for God, he says that the remnant of the flock will be gathered and brought back to their fold. Furthermore, God promises to raise up shepherds who will shepherd the people properly, so they will be secure – none will be missing, and neither will they be frightened. And, ultimately, God will raise up a branch of David, a king, who will rule rightly; it's a prophecy that, as Christians, we believe is fulfilled in Jesus.

Although we are, perhaps, used to the comparison of a shepherd and king in the Bible, they are positions that are usually widely separated in society, yet they have similar roles. Both have a duty to care for, protect and provide for those they are responsible for, to the utmost of their ability. The king is bound to care for his subjects and the shepherd for his sheep. And, in those days, both would have been literal leaders. A king would have led out the people if the nation was attacked; the shepherd led his sheep from the sheepfold out to pasture each day. I am sure it was not a coincidence that David was a shepherd before God told Samuel to anoint him as king.

Through his prophecy, Jeremiah had compassion on the people, bringing them hope in the aftermath of disaster, just as Jesus had compassion on the people of his day, the crowds who had come searching for him. Both did something to alleviate the suffering of the people.

What did Jesus see in the face of those people that evoked such a strong feeling, that moved him so much he felt compelled to alleviate their suffering some way? Perhaps it was the abject poverty that characterised rural Galilee at that time. It was mainly an agricultural area, with some fishing around the Lake, and the vast majority of people would have lived at or below subsistence level. Living, as they did, under Roman occupation with its heavy taxes would have increased the hardship people faced. As a carpenter from Nazareth, Jesus would have understood their struggles.

Or perhaps there was more to this Old Testament image of sheep without a shepherd than just poverty. It is an image of people wandering aimlessly, without a plan, hungry for food but also for meaning and purpose in their lives. There had been a long history of faithless kings and priests, the leaders who had not lived up to their responsibilities, who had failed to care for the people spiritually or materially. Jesus' response was to address both their spiritual and material hunger. Here, we are told he began to teach them many things, and next week we will hear the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand as he attended to their physical need for food.

Mark's Gospel highlights that the prophecy from Jeremiah, and elsewhere in the Old Testament, that God would raise up a Davidic shepherd-king, is fulfilled in Jesus. The period of the people being sheep without a shepherd was at an end; God's Messiah had arrived and Jesus will restore and lead God's people, caring, protecting and providing for them. The people were desperate for this healing and wholeness. At the end of today's reading we are told that the crowd were there wherever he went, at every opportunity, bringing the sick, begging to even touch his clothing.

In the face of human need, Jesus continues to respond to people spiritually and materially. People today still seek healing and wholeness as they struggle to make ends meet, to find a balance between the demands of work and family life, as they seek meaning in their lives. The Good News that we have to share is that God's love in Jesus Christ is for everyone.

In Christ, people of diverse backgrounds are brought together as one flock; 'one body' as Paul puts it in Ephesians. It is a theme which he returned to many times in his writings as he sought to show the Jewish and Gentile Christian communities of the early church that they were all one. Here, he tells them that Christ is the peace that has broken down divisions and made them one. That Christ Jesus is the cornerstone on which all God's people are united. That unity of Christian people is something that the church continues to aspire to today, even though our history is littered with failures and divisions.

When we come together to worship God, we sing together, we pray together, we confess together, we share the peace, and we share the Eucharist – all are invited, all are welcome. And Jesus continues to have compassion on us all, individually and collectively, in our particular circumstances and need. He is the shepherd, the Good Shepherd as John's Gospel puts it, who leads us, cares for us, protects us and provides for us.