

Sunday, July 22, 2018

16th^t in Ordinary Time (B)

Conventual Mass His Heart Was Moved With Pity For Them,
For They Were Like Sheep Without A Shepherd

For all pastoral and nomadic peoples, shepherds are important figures. Usually they are the heads of families aided by their sons and daughters. If they must have help, they must be trusted persons because they are trusted with important responsibilities. As a result, among the peoples of the ancient Near East, and the Hebrews in particular, the image of the shepherd is naturally used to designate, the chiefs, the kings, all who have authority and even God. The people of Israel was the property of God, who had chosen it. God is the true shepherd of his people, and It follows that the leaders could only be the Lord's helpers and servants. They were held to observe his instructions and give him an account of

their management. If the flock was ill-cared for, exhausted by too long a drive, if sheep got lost, the shepherds in charge, who were responsible, deserved to be dismissed, even punished, when the shepherds were convicted of neglect or dishonest dealings. The prophet Jeremiah speaks in this vein in our first reading: “Woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture, says the Lord” (Jer. 23:2).ⁱ

Today we have little contact with shepherds and sheep, although a generation or two ago they were very much a part of the rural landscape. Our image of shepherds and sheep comes mostly from illustrations giving an ideal and sanitized version. We are even familiar with those Dresden figurines showing shepherds and shepherdesses dressed in ornate

costumes leaning against a tree idly contemplating a sheep nibbling on some grass.

The reality was and is much different. It is hard work. The shepherd's life is one with his sheep. He must travel with his sheep from pasture to pasture finding shelter as best he can. He leads them to cover in inclement weather and defends them against beasts of prey and thieves endangering his own life to protect them. (David boasted that he killed lions and bears when they attacked his father's flocks (1 S 17:34-37).). He must train them to recognize his voice and follow him wherever he leads. He must keep his flock together searching out the ones who stray. They are a dirty lot and he must wash them before shearing.ⁱⁱ And: "Woe to the shepherds who

mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture, says the Lord” (Jer. 23:2).

The image of the shepherd is still a good point of comparison with any who hold some form of authority. It is still a good image for God, for Christ who is the Good Shepherd. Unfortunately, the image of the hireling, the irresponsible shepherd who “misleads and scatters the flock is also applicable in today’s world. Sadly we have come to know of such narcissistic shepherds who prey on their sheep in our own time. We see it in the church where such shepherds lead others away from Christ. We see it in politics where the rights of the poor and oppressed are trampled upon. It occurs in all levels of an egocentric society even on the level of the family where the rights of the innocent are compromised.

Christ, the good shepherd, gives us a different model, one flowing from compassion, love and care. In today's Gospel, the disciples have just come back from their missionary journey where they preached the good news, healed the sick and drove out demons. The mission was a success and now they deserved a rest, some solitude. Jesus, who gave himself without reserve for others now wants to draw the twelve aside for refreshment.

It was not to be. The crowds, eager to see, hear and touch Jesus would not let him and his disciples out of their sight. They could not get enough of him. And Jesus, seeing that they were like sheep without a shepherd had compassion on them.

The common people, "the people of the land" had been abandoned by their leaders. Some of these

leaders were interested only in keeping in good graces with the occupying Roman force in order to maintain their own power. Other religious leaders, so bound up with the minutiae of their own observances, looked down upon the people whom they saw as ignorant and not caring about the niceties of ritual observances. The people responded to the divine love and compassion they found in Jesus as exemplified in his teaching, his healing miracles and other works that made them realize the love God had for them. There is no shade of annoyance in Jesus in spite of the fact that his plans were thwarted. He began to teach at once, bringing to fulfillment the prophetic words of Jeremiah and others that God himself would provide shepherds for his people.ⁱⁱⁱ

We tend to think of authority, of shepherding as restricted to positions in the church or government. But all of us in some way are called to be shepherds in family life, at work, or in our relationship with others. We are called to be shepherds, good shepherds after the model of Christ who placed the needs of others before his own. If there was no rest for Jesus, there can be no rest for his followers. By virtue of our baptismal calling, all of us have Christian responsibilities and a certain amount of shepherding to do. At times there seems to be no let up. In a family, if children are not cared for and given direction, they are going to be lost and wander aimlessly through life. Being the good shepherd that Christ wants us to be is hard business. It can only be accomplished by steadfast prayer and developing our

own relationship with Jesus, the Good Shepherd.^{iv}

This does not mean that there is not time in our lives for our rest and solitude. We also need to go to a “desert place” to establish and reestablish our own relationship to the Good Shepherd if we are to do his work. Only by sharing in his life can we be effective in carrying on his work of making concrete to the world the good news of salvation.

- i" Days of the Lord: The Liturgical Year, v.5 (Collegeville, Minn., The Liturgical Press, 1993) 147
- ii" John L. McKenzie, Dictionary of the Bible (Milwaukee, Bruce, 1964) 802
- iii" Roland J. Faley, Footprints on the Mountain (New York, Paulist Press, 1994) 491
- iv" Desmond Knowles, Voicing a Thought on Sunday (Dublin, The Columbia Press, 1991) 216