

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Gospel: Mark 6:30-34

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.

REFLECTION 1: SHEEP WITHOUT SHEPHERDS

Mother Teresa tells how one day she visited an old people's home in Sweden. It was efficiently run. The food was good, the staff was well trained and treated the patients well. It seemed like an ideal place to end one's day. There were about forty elderly men and women in the home. They seemed to have everything they wanted. Yet, as she went around she noticed that none of them smiled. She also noticed something else – they kept looking towards the door and she asked one of the nurses why this was so. 'They are longing for someone to visit them' the nurse replied. 'They are always looking and thinking, maybe my son, maybe my daughter, maybe someone will come to visit me today – but no one comes. It's the same every day'. 'No one comes' - the words haunted Mother Teresa. These elderly people had been put away in this home by their families and then abandoned. That sense of being abandoned was by far their greatest suffering. Sometimes a person may have no choice but to place an elderly parent in a home. However, it's the spirit in which this is done that matters. Having put an elderly parent in a home one person may abandon that person, whereas, another visits regularly. A Christian who doesn't care is like a lamp that doesn't give light. Caring is never easy, yet all of us are capable of caring, all that is required is an open heart. When we care we are living the Gospel.

Jesus in today's Gospel is the image of a shepherd caring for the crowds that followed him – 'they were like sheep without a shepherd' (Mark 6: 30-34). The Bible reflects this shepherd ideal as the blueprint of God's appointed leaders who were to look after their people. In our first reading today (Jer. 23: 1-6) we see the Lord condemning those shepherds who have not cared for their flock but have allowed them to scatter and be destroyed. The Lord says that he will raise up true shepherds who will properly pasture his sheep.

In today's Gospel from St. Mark which is the conclusion of the passage begun last week, we see the twelve returning to Jesus after they have been preaching in his name and they return rejoicing. They go off to be alone and to rest, but the people follow them because they went to hear more about this carpenter from Nazareth and his message. Jesus takes pity on them and teaches them himself. So intent is he on imparting his message to them that Jesus skips lunch – 'no time even to eat'. He is the good Shepherd who cares for his flock, feeding them with the words of salvation.

Times have not really changed. The World today badly needs those who will preach Christ's message of redemption. As baptised Christians we are all commissioned to go out and preach the Good News of the kingdom in word and in the example of our lives. There are so many out there in Ireland today whose families have forgotten about Jesus Christ or have not really come to know him. Each of us is invited to bring our fellow men and women to the truth and knowledge of God.

Paul today tells us that Christ is the link that joins so many people together in peace. All who believe in him, regardless of colour or nationality, have a place in the kingdom and so are all brothers and sisters in the eyes of God.

Perhaps a prayer from the Psalter, Christ's own prayer book, puts it well:

'This world is yours Lord, we are all one in the mould of your fashioning. You gather together the children of every race. All bonded in birth as brothers and sisters. Grant us a truly compassionate spirit to love every person, respect all people, your presence living in the hearts of all. Strengthen our roots, deepen our sources, and knit us together as allies to all humankind'. 'Place a mark Lord, in your register of peoples – all find a home in me' Psalm 87:7.

REFLECTION 2:

REST FOR A WHILE

After a hard week of work, who does not look forward to coming home on a Friday night? It's finally time to relax, enjoy dinner, take a bath, slip into one's pyjamas and curl up with a book or watch TV. However our plans and hopes sometimes get swept aside when life sends an unexpected problem – a child gets sick, the dinner gets burnt, the boiler springs a leak and the kitchen is flooded. Such was the case in today's Gospel story. The returning disciples were ready for some well-deserved rest. Jesus suggested that they all go to a deserted place, but the Heavenly Father had other plans, he was allowing 5,000 hungry followers to waylay him in a deserted cove wanting to be fed. Unlike most of us, Jesus did not resent or resist and when he saw the crowd his first reaction was pity and compassion. Like a merciful host country welcoming migrants on shore fleeing hunger and war. For Jesus the sight recalled for him a huge flock of sheep without a shepherd (Mk 6:30-34)

Blessed Oscar Romero, martyred archbishop of San Salvador did not set out to be a controversial figure or engender the enmity of the powerful. What he did was to listen to the cries of his people, respond from his guts and deal with the consequences. His life reminds us that being a shepherd to his people in need may not be a safe profession, but it does promise that those who emulate him will be in good company.

The people who shared Jesus' background were reluctant at first to believe he could be anyone special. Now we have people thronging to him to such an extent that Mark says, 'they had no opportunity even to eat.' That phrase may be part of the preparation, for sharing the bread in next Sunday's Gospel. That mass of humanity tugged at his heartstrings and Jesus gave them his remaining strength. One can imagine how much energy it took to teach that amount of people all day long. It was Jesus' way to make the lesson believable by showing they were important to him. In our daily encounters we see people like sheep without a shepherd. Some will be looking for a purpose in life, some steeped in cynicism, others in fear. Will we allow ourselves to be used long enough to tell them that God cares by showing them that we care? As St. Teresa of Avila once remarked, 'When we settle ourselves in solitude, we will come upon Jesus in ourselves.' We pray, 'O God restore us to our own. Smile on us and we will be saved. You it was who tilled the soil, that your church, your vine should flourish; it struck root and encircled the globe. Amen'.