

# “LIKE SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD”

THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR (ORD TIME B 2015)

LIKE SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD (MK 6:34)

The image of the shepherd is frequent in the Bible. In today's first reading Jeremiah condemns the shepherds, understood as unscrupulous leaders. Presumably Jesus looking on the crowd with compassion- utters the same sentiment- they are like sheep without a shepherd. This first mission involved preaching, teaching and curing. The disciples were doing just what Jesus had been doing, and came back exhausted.

## Historical Realism

It is so necessary for us to keep always in mind the enormous time span between those Galilee days and the world in which we now live. There then we find a group of mainly locals, under the direction of Jesus, bringing good news. They knew little yet of the big Roman world. They knew that good leadership was a universal need. But how could what was happening to them in that small world ever become a universal transforming movement which today is called the Church?

## Ephesians

Today's reading from Ephesians shows us what the Christian influence had already achieved. Convert Jews and convert Gentiles amazingly were living together in harmony; they were communities of reconciliation and peace. This was in one of the major cultural cities of the Roman empire. The leaders of these communities were making the image of the Good Shepherd real.

## A Long Leap

Let us now come to our own time. We think of Pope John XXIII. Good Pope John was one of fourteen children, the fourth child of a poor share-cropper in Sotto il Monte in Northern Italy. As the supreme pastor of the Church he made it clear that he loved everyone. Having come from poverty he was determined never to forget that he had belonged with that poverty where most people still are. His identity would not change; only his responsibilities and his institutional enablement to do something about it. Effectively he said: 'I am just like you. And this is what we can do, all of us who are of good will'. He published the great social encyclical, Peace on Earth, and convened Vatican II- a pastoral Council called to address the total gospel to the whole world. There were no enemies, unless they chose to be such. Vatican II condemned nobody. The shepherd does not abandon his sheep. He cares for them. And they provide all the joys and all the

sorrows that people are capable of. John XXIII knew the problems of his age intimately- having lived for years as a nuncio in Bulgaria, with responsibility for Catholicism in the Moslem world of Turkey and with the Orthodox in Greece. He then assumed the very delicate post in France after the years of German occupation with the ambiguities and compromises it gestated. At the age of 76 he went up to the conclave in Rome as patriarch of Venice, with a return ticket in his pocket. In less than five years what a difference he made. He was the first pope to come out of the confinement of the Vatican since Pius IX. His massive experience did not diminish his capacity for personal relationships. He was like Jesus, meeting with everyone, changing the face of the Church by what he was doing even more powerfully than by what he was saying. He visited his Roman faithful, where they worked and where they suffered, and famously in prison. Only last week Barak Obama became the first American president to visit a major prison in the USA.

We look around for examples of shepherds with values. And the family surely is the main place where we receive our values or are denied them. Realism should dominate our thinking here. The family of Jesus rejected him. They thought he was mad (Mk 3:6). Most of us know the bad and the good in our own family story. But we who willingly come to Mass are indicating already that we are still seeking together what is good. We want to be filled with compassion and understanding. We surely do not cultivate each other's faith company in order to be gossips and destructive, a frequent concern of Pope Francis. We come to Mass to share with others the pursuit of what is good, in worship and in life, to change sorrow to gladness, to stand for the same values. We come for mutual help to shoulder our responsibilities.

### **Pope Francis**

Pope Francis looks like a double take on Pope John XXIII, and he has just been to S. America on a pastoral visit. As a priest there he had long perceived the poor and deprived Latin Americans as sheep without a shepherd. He identified with them as pope. They felt it. They just wanted to touch him. They were not asking for his economic aid- they were sensing in him Christ the Good Shepherd. Words and gestures were even more important than handouts. Words of love, affirmation, dignity, total respect, total empathy, saying to them: I have never left you. Millions listened to him, not for his immediate economic contribution to them. He was like Jesus that day in Galilee seeing the shepherd less sheep and making life worth-while for them. He was personal- his genial genuine deportment does not condemn but encourages. He does not hive off into some protected corner with likeminded pals, avoiding the rest. He acknowledged on the

flight back to Rome that he might have overdone one aspect of things. In answer to a question he acknowledged that he did not attend enough to the middle classes who have to live too. He would think about it. Only love and respect can change us all.

### **Conclusion**

We mostly live in a tiny world of relationships. Galilee was seemingly insignificant. Yet the meaning of life was being exemplified there. The shepherd image has connected with all the most important values in the world. In the created world everything is interconnected- as the Pope's most recent encyclical insists. That is why we are here together, to remember and to foster, and as far as possible, to live out these values. Amen.

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