

FIRST IMPRESSIONS 16th SUNDAY (B)
Jeremiah 23: 1-6 Psalm 23 Ephesians 2: 13-18 Mark 6: 30-34
By: Jude Siciliano, OP

PRENOTE:

We have just posted an article by Sr. Brenda Walsh, OP entitled, *SEARCHING FOR A CONTEMPLATIVE WAY OF LIFE*. You will find it good input in the light Jesus' invitation to his disciples, "Come away by yourselves to a deserted place...." Go to <https://www.PreacherExchange.com> and click on "Dominican Preaching."

The gospel describes the people, like lost sheep, coming helter-skelter to search Jesus out. It reminds me of a time when I was with a group of shepherds in the hills of West Virginia. We were sharing today's gospel. The shepherds posed a riddle, "If there were 100 sheep in a pasture and one jumped over the fence how many would be left?" That wasn't a very hard question to answer – or so I thought. "Ninety-nine," I quickly responded – but with a sense of suspicion. Their answer proved I didn't have a clue about sheep. "Nope," said one of the shepherds, "sheep are so dumb they would all follow the first and there would be none left! You've got to keep an eye on them all the time, because sooner or later they'll get in trouble, or lost, or eaten by a wild animal." How was I to know this, there were no sheep or shepherds on the streets of Brooklyn where I played stickball as a kid!

But the people of the Bible would certainly know what today's references to shepherding meant. God, speaking through Jeremiah, says, in disgust of Israel's leaders, who had the responsibility for shepherding the people, "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock... I will appoint shepherds for them who will shepherd them...."

Who says we moderns have little in common with Jesus and his disciples? Judging from today's gospel, they and we have trouble finding time to take a break from the frenetic rush and responsibilities of daily life. For example, modern technology is both a marvel and a major stress-producer. We have instant access to one another, but we have trouble escaping from that access. There probably isn't a parish we go these days that doesn't precede worship services with an announcement like this: "Before we began our service this morning would you please turn off your cell phones and pagers." Nothing spoils the prayerful

atmosphere more, it seems, than a cell phone's jazzy ring in the middle of the most solemn part of the service. Worshipers seem to tolerate a crying baby better than the person who forgets to heed the request made before the service began, "Please turn off your cell phones and pagers."

Jesus and his disciples didn't have the intrusion of modern technology to interrupt their need for quiet and rest. But what they did have was a vast number of desperate people looking for leadership. In the image of today's Jeremiah and Mark readings, they were, "like sheep without a shepherd." During biblical times the king was often likened to a shepherd. Jeremiah criticizes the shepherds, both the political and religious leaders of Judah, who led the people astray. These leaders were corrupt, and their evil ways caused the destruction of Jerusalem and the people's exile to Babylon. What the people needed were good leaders to shepherd them. Jeremiah says God has decided to take on that task. This promise would be fulfilled, the people believed, by an ideal, future king, who would gather the flock and restore Israel to its former glory. We Christians see God's promise fulfilled in Jesus, as today's passage from Mark shows. But Jesus wasn't the shepherd who would lead to military greatness and worldly treasures.

Just a brief look at today's Psalm Response. The 23rd Psalm suggests some ways God fulfills the promise to shepherd us. According to that Psalm, God nourishes and guides us to rest and refreshment; comforts, encourages and removes our fear – at the very moment we face our enemies ("in the sight of my foes"). As we face the darkness and even death, God, the Shepherd, sets a table to nourish us and anoints our heads with oil to comfort and strengthen us. Have you ever been at the bedside of someone who, facing death, exhibits calm and courage? If we have, then we know that God is present and is doing just as God promised in Jeremiah, "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock... and bring them back to their meadow...."

Since Jesus wasn't the expected military leader the people anticipated, what form does his shepherding take? Today Mark tells us that one way he shepherds us is by teaching. When Jesus sees the crowd he is "moved with pity for them." I am not a doctor, but I know one thing: if I saw a person lying on the ground bleeding, I would do my best to stop the flow of blood. If I saw a blind person stepping out into on-coming traffic, I would run up to pull them back to the sidewalk. If I came upon a starving person I would get them some food. First things first. Which is

what Jesus does, he addresses the people's most serious needs.

Upon disembarking from the boat with his disciples, Jesus sees the vast crowd and "his heart was moved with pity for them...." He sees what they need most and so he teaches them. First things first. They and we hunger for his teaching. That's why the first half of our liturgy focuses on the Word of God. We need to hear the good news about God and so our spiritual hunger brings us to church again today.

The Shepherd promised by God has arrived and teaches the bewildered flock. He is the true Shepherd they have lacked; he will not leave them on their own because God will not leave them. Through Jesus they will learn about the reign of God. He will teach them that: God loves them and is ready to forgive their sins; though the world treats them as last, in God's eyes they are first; God is their true Ruler and God's reign is one of justice, peace and love. Jesus will also teach them that, if they accept his teaching and receive the reign of God into their lives, then they must treat others as God is treated them: love one another; welcome the stranger; forgive even their enemies; care for the needy and welcome the least and forgotten to their table.

It's clear in Mark's Gospel that Jesus was immensely popular with the crowds. Today's gospel is a good example of that as they go out of their way to track him down, be with and listen to him. What the political and religious leaders of Israel had failed to do, Jesus was now doing – shepherding the people as Jeremiah promised, "... he shall reign and govern wisely, and he shall do what is just in the land."

Compassion was the mark of the Shepherd. Teaching was his first response to the needs he saw in the people. Even in these hard times most of us can manage to eat, drink and take care of ourselves and our families. We may be strong enough to travel—but where are we going in life? Are we on the right path or are we drifting all over the place? Jesus is the Shepherd who provides us true nourishment for our journey – wisdom. That's why we gather each week at Eucharist: to receive that Wisdom in the Word and the Meal we share.

Did the crowd that day fully appreciate what happened? Good people and sinners; the rich and the poor; the healthy and the sick ate at the same "table." All were welcome and all were treated as equals. I wonder if they "got it" and let their lives

be changed by the experience? When they met one another after that meal, did they treat each other differently? Do they put aside old grudges, forgive old injuries? Did they ever share one of their meals with others, feed them as freely as they were fed? If they did, then they “got it.” Of course, all of the above could also be asked of us who are gathered around this table today. What difference will our being together, hearing the story and sharing the same meal, have on our lives?

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run. “Faith Book” is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today’s Gospel will reading:

When Jesus disembarked and saw the vast crowd,
his heart was moved with pity for them,
for they were like sheep without a shepherd;
and he began to teach them many things.

Reflection:

Teaching was the first response Jesus made to the needs he saw among the people who came to search him out. He knew their most basic needs, for had a wisdom that only he could provide them. What about us? Are we on the right path or are we drifting all over the place? The Shepherd is ready to provide us a necessary food for our journey – wisdom. That’s why we gather each week at Eucharist: to receive that Wisdom in the Word and the Meal we share.

So, we ask ourselves:

- Which wisdom guides our most important decisions – the world’s or Jesus’.
- To what sources does our search for wisdom take us?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

“Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while”. (Mark 6:30)
“Our social ministry must be anchored in prayer, where we uncover the depths of God’s call to seek justice and pursue peace.”

(US Catholic Bishops: Communities of Salt and Light)

Every Wednesday evening (except 5th Wednesdays), a small group of Sacred Heart parishioners comes away **“to a deserted place and rests a while”**. They come to share prayer, silence, the presence of God’s Spirit and that of each other, and a

growing sense of community and friendship. They come to deepen their practice of contemplative prayer.

“Entering into contemplative prayer is like entering into the Eucharistic liturgy: we "gather up" the heart, recollect our whole being under the prompting of the Holy Spirit, abide in the dwelling place of the Lord which we are, awaken our faith in order to enter into the presence of him who awaits us.

Contemplative prayer is the prayer of the child of God... who agrees to welcome the love by which he is loved and who wants to respond to it by loving even more.”

“Contemplative prayer is the simplest expression of the mystery of prayer. In it the Father strengthens our inner being with power through his Spirit "that Christ may dwell in [our] hearts through faith" and we may be "grounded in love."

“Contemplative prayer is *hearing* the Word of God. Far from being passive, such attentiveness is the obedience of faith, the unconditional acceptance of a servant, and the loving commitment of a child. It participates in the "Yes" of the Son become servant and the *Fiat* of God's lowly handmaid.”(#2709-#2719 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*)

Centering Prayer is one very simple *method* of prayer, which prepares us to receive the gift of God's presence, traditionally called contemplative prayer.

Lectio Divina (Prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture) is another method of prayer which leads into a more contemplative awareness of God's Presence and opens us to the powerful working of God's Spirit through Holy Scripture.

Sacred Heart's Contemplative Prayer group meets every Wednesday (except for 5th Wednesdays. We alternate between prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture (Lectio Divina) on the 1st and 3rd weeks and silent contemplative prayer (Centering Prayer) on the 2nd and 4th weeks. This gathering takes place from 6:00–7:00 in the front room of the Vocation Office. **Everyone is most welcome to “come and see”.**

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates' names and addresses. I invite you to

write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

David Fierro #C49660 has been on death row for over 20 years. He could use a post card and/or a pen pal. Please write to him at: San Quentin Prison

San Quentin, California 94974

Thank you.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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