

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jesus said to them (the apostles): Come by yourselves to an out-of-the-way place and rest a little.”...Upon disembarking, Jesus saw a vast crowd. He pitied them for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them at great length.

Mark 6, 30-34



I am writing this reflection from a Sydney that is in the grip of a serious lock-down because of the spread of the Covid virus, delta strain. Predictions are that the lock-down will be an extended one. While we can link into Mass-online from a variety of parish churches, I find that there is no community feel about it. That lack of community feeling stimulated my reflection on the very first verse of today's gospel-reading. There Mark records: "The apostles returned to Jesus and reported to him all that they had done and what they had taught." Jesus did the community thing and engaged his disciples in sharing. He conducted no interrogation and made no assessment of their efforts. Clearly, he had listened to the apostles and had come to the conclusion that what they needed most was a rest: "Come by yourselves to an out-of-the-way place and rest a little."

That prompted me to start asking myself some questions about what could happen when our parish communities reassemble when the lock-down is over. I wonder what might happen if our Pastor were to say something like this: "I think it might be a good idea if we had something like a shared homily today. We could sit in small groups and share with one another what the lock-down has been like for us. We might even share something of the good news of our interactions (our gospel) with those with whom we have been living, with those with whom we have connected by skype, email and ZOOM. We might even share the frustrations and difficulties we experienced. After all, we are disciples in our own homes and work-places, and in our linkages with friends, acquaintances and relatives." The fact is that we don't stop being followers of Jesus when lock-downs happen. The spin-off from such a happening might mean that we might get to know and appreciate one another a little more. We might get to break through the protective barriers we build around ourselves and discover one another's humanity. Now, after that flight of fantasy, I had better give some attention to today's readings.

In today's gospel-reading, Mark relates that so many people were lining up for the attention of Jesus and his disciples that Jesus realised that they would be swamped by the demands being made of them. Seeing the need for some peace and quiet, he had suggested that they head for a secluded spot. Mark doesn't say how the crowds got wind of where Jesus and the disciples were headed, but the crowds were one step ahead of them and were at their destination point to welcome them when they came ashore. Mark notes that Jesus expressed not the slightest sign of frustration when his plans came to nothing. Mark simply states: "Upon disembarking, Jesus saw a vast crowd. He pitied them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd." Instead of showing annoyance, Jesus felt compassion for the needy people blocking his way. He reflected that they were just like the Israelites of old, "sheep without a shepherd". That expression echoes words attributed to Moses in the Book of Numbers. God had informed Moses that he would not be the one to lead his people into the Promised Land. However, God did direct Moses to go up into the Abarim Mountains, from where he would be able to view the land that God was going to give to the Israelites. Fully aware of the human frailties that plagued the people he was leading, Moses pleaded with God for them: "May the Lord, the God of the spirits of all humankind, set over the community a man who shall act as their leader in all things, to guide them in all their actions;

so that the Lord's community may not be like sheep without a shepherd" (Numbers 27, 15-16). God heard Moses' prayer and directed Moses to anoint Joshua as the one who would lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. But that was not the end of the story. As Israel's history unfolded after they had taken possession of the land promised to them, it was their appointed shepherds who failed them. A long line of prophets had encouraged, threatened and even reasoned with Israel's leaders and kings to exercise their responsibilities with integrity, justice, compassion and understanding; to shepherd the people entrusted to their care. Israel's shepherds continued to disappoint by serving themselves rather than their people. In today's first reading we hear Jeremiah fulminating against the leaders of his time, proclaiming that God had had enough, that God would be the one who would step into the role of Shepherd of Israel. Jeremiah puts into the mouth of God these words, reprimanding the leaders of Israel: "You've scattered my sheep. You've driven them off. You haven't kept your eye on them. Well, let me tell you, I'm keeping my eye on you, keeping track of your criminal behaviour. I'll take over and gather what's left of my sheep...I'll bring them back where they belong, and they'll recover and flourish. I'll set shepherd leaders over them who will take good care of them. They won't live in fear or panic anymore." (Jeremiah 23, 2-4).

Jesus was very conscious of Israel's long list of "Shepherds" who had failed their people. We know from the Gospels how he was consistently critical of the religious shepherds of his own day for the manner in which they had neglected the ordinary people in their care. We know, too, how Jesus had described himself as "the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep" (John 10, 11). The metaphor is taken from an occupation that was familiar to every Israelite. But let's not forget that shepherding was and is a tough role at every level. Those who shepherded real sheep were hardened, weather-beaten men, accustomed to fighting off human and animal marauders. Shepherds at the religious and political level had to deal with institutional corruption as well as with all manner of people whose demands and expectations were legion. And, like every one of us, they had their share of human frailty. We can appreciate just how appropriate the metaphor of shepherding is when we look at those who are shepherded. Sheep are not exactly the smartest of animals. Whoever first applied the sheep metaphor to human beings may well have been, unwittingly, spot on. We, too, can be as empty-headed and unpredictable as sheep. Those we appoint and elect to be our shepherds often grow into developing a deep affection for their sheep, but they don't always get it right. Some even slip back into behaving like sheep themselves.

Even though Jesus had his plans interrupted by the crowd of "sheep" blocking his way, his heart went out to them. He shelved his plans when he was faced with a greater need. That very decision in itself was an object lesson for his disciples. All this is a reminder to us that we, too, as followers of Jesus, have accepted the dual role of shepherd and sheep and the dual responsibility of encouraging our shepherds and constructively critiquing their actions when they fail us. That, of course, means that we need to take time to look into the mirror ourselves, to reflect on our failures and to be alert to the occasions when the only appropriate response open to us is to show compassion.