

Shepherds & Priests (16th Sunday – Year B)

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark: (Mk. 6' 30-34)

The apostles rejoined Jesus and told him all they had done and taught. Then he said to them, “You must come away to some lonely place all by yourselves, and rest for a while,” for there were so many coming and going that the apostle had no time even to eat. So they went off in a boat to a lonely place where they could be by themselves.

But people saw them going, and many could guess where, and from every town they all hurried to the place on foot and reached it before them.

So as he stepped ashore he saw a large crowd; and he took pity on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he let himself to teach them at some length.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

The readings of last Sunday contained precious guidance for the preachers of the Gospel, to help them announce faithfully the Good news; it also had precious advice for us too as to how we should receive them and the message they preach in God's name.

The Church is well aware that the life of our Christian communities depends, to a very large extent, on the quality of their spiritual leaders; hence, through the readings of today, she continues last Sunday's exhortation.

Her message today is as follows: *Spiritual shepherds should forget themselves and be concerned at all times about the needs of their flock. After the example of Jesus, they should be messengers of peace and union in the communities entrusted to their care. Their communities in turn should have one aim in view: to maintain at all costs union within the community.*

[1. *The importance of sheep and shepherds in the life of the people of Israel:*]

Sheep and shepherds were very important in the life of the people of Israel. We read about it both in the Old Testament and New Testament. Why so? Why are they so important?

Because for hundreds of years, before they established themselves in Palestine, the Israelites were a people of shepherds. They did not live in villages and houses as many of us do, but in tents, moving from place to place with their flocks.

There are peoples still nowadays who live that way: they are called “nomads” a word which means “wandering people,” such as many of the *Masaais*. They hardly cultivate land; they obtain the necessities of life from their flocks by selling milk, cheese, meat and so on in the local markets.

Abraham and his large family lived that way; so did Isaac and Jacob and his sons after him. We have a confirmation of this in the Book of Genesis: when Joseph, the son of Jacob, became the most important person in Egypt after Pharaoh, he called his father and brothers down to Egypt. He announced their arrival to Pharaoh in the following terms: “My brothers and my father's family who were in the land of Canaan have come to me. The men are shepherds and look after livestock, and they have brought their flocks and cattle and all their possessions” (Gen. 46: 32)

And they were still shepherds when they left Egypt. The Book of Exodus tells us that as they left the country, led by Moses, they took with them sheep, goat and cattle in large numbers (Ex. 12, 38).

Many among them carried on with their life as shepherds also after settled in Palestine. David for instance was looking after the sheep of his father Jesse when Samuel went to Bethlehem to anoint him as king of Israel (1 Sam. 16: 11-13).

- Now you might understand why God compares himself time and again to a shepherd whose flock is the people of Israel. It was the best comparison to help the Jews realise God's love and concern for them.

In Scripture kings and priests too are often called "shepherds" "God's shepherds", since they were supposed to look after the people of Israel in God's name and imitate him in his love and concern for the people. These details regarding flocks and shepherds in Israel should help us understand the meaning of today's readings. Let us now examine them in detail by first looking at the reading from prophet Jeremiah:

[2. Jeremiah announces an extraordinary shepherd to come]:

"Disaster for the shepherds who lose and scatter the sheep of my pasture, Yahweh declares. This, therefore, is what Yahweh, God of Israel, says about the shepherds who shepherd my people, "You have scattered my flock, you have driven them away and have not taken care of them. Right, I shall take care of you for your misdeeds, Yahweh declares! But the remnant of my flock I myself shall gather from all the countries where I have driven them, and bring them back to their folds; they will be fruitful and increase in numbers. For them I shall raise up shepherds to shepherd them and pasture them. No fear, no terror for them any more; not one shall be lost, Yahweh declares!"

Look, the days are coming, Yahweh declares, when I shall raise an upright Branch for David; he will reign as king and be wise, doing what is just and upright in the country. In his days Judah will triumph and Israel live in safety. And this is the name he will be called, 'Yahweh-is-our-Saving-Justice.' "

What you have read was written by the prophet in the most tragic circumstances: a large section of the people had been already taken into exile by the king of Babylon; the rest of the population would soon follow, and their town and temple would soon be destroyed.

- Jeremiah blames the civil and religious authorities, the shepherds of Israel, for Israel's misfortunes: instead of looking after the good of their flock, they had only looked after their own interest. What is worse, they had led Israel into sin time and again, and sin had brought about their exile. It was in such sad circumstances that Jeremiah, inspired by God, made an extraordinary announcement:

- The guilty shepherds of Israel would be dismissed; they too would be taken into exile to end their days there.
- When no one would expect it, God would bring his people back home from exile.

- In due time, God would send to his people a most faithful shepherd, a shepherd-king, a descendant of David.

Other faithful shepherds would be appointed to look after the people under the guidance of that “shepherd-king” to come. Peace and holiness would reign in Israel under the guidance of this extraordinary shepherd and his helpers.

3. This prophecy of Jeremiah was fulfilled in Jesus. The Gospel of this Sunday speaks to us about the king-shepherd and his helpers announced by Jeremiah: they were Jesus and his apostles.

Jesus had recently chosen the apostles; we saw him last Sunday, sending them on a preaching tour to announce the Good News, just as he himself was doing. His aim was to prepare them for their future task; they should go about it the way he himself was doing.

The apostles returned from their tour tired but happy. They were elated at the experience that the extraordinary powers Jesus had conferred on them had really worked.

But the apostles too were part of Jesus’ flock; his chosen portion; not even their material welfare escaped his concern, and seeing them so tired, he invited them to take some rest with him in a lonely place.

But on reaching there, they found that a large crowd was already waiting for them, anxious to listen to Jesus. And what did Jesus do? He forgot his own tiredness, invited the apostles to forget theirs, and started teaching the people.

Mark points out the pity that Jesus felt for the crowd; he felt pity for their spiritual state; they looked like sheep without a shepherd. There were plenty of self-proclaimed spiritual leaders around in those days: the Scribes, the Pharisees, the Jewish priests, but like the shepherds blamed by Jeremiah, they too looked after their own interest rather than after the good of the people. They too were about to be dismissed; Jesus and his apostles would take their place.

Here we notice the great love of Jesus for us and our communities. First he became the Shepherd who laid down his life in ransom for us; and then he appointed shepherds who will act in his name, yet fully depending on him!

This lesson taught by Jesus on that occasion must have remained engraved in the heart of the apostles for the rest of their lives: like Jesus, the shepherds appointed by him were to forget themselves, their interests, even a legitimate rest; the good of the people entrusted to their care should be their only concern.

4. There is one more great thing that Jesus did for our communities. By giving the Holy Spirit to everyone, Jesus wiped away all distinctions among men. Isn’t it great?

Look at the second reading of this Sunday taken from the letter of Saint Paul to his Christians of Ephesus. The largest number of Christians in that community had been pagans before. But Christian teachers who had come from Judaism kept on boasting of their being Jews, as if that fact made them somewhat superior to Christians who had come from paganism. Saint Paul wrote:

“But now in Christ Jesus, you that used to be so far off have been brought close, by the blood of Christ. For he is the peace between us, and has made the two into one entity and broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart, by destroying in his own person the hostility, that is, the Law of commandments with its decrees. His purpose in this was, by restoring peace, to create a single New Man out of the two of them, and through the cross, to reconcile them both to God in one Body; in his own person he killed the hostility.”

- In this passage, Paul, a Jew himself, makes it clear that it is immaterial what group one belonged to before becoming a Christian. What matters is the Life in the Spirit received at Baptism by Jews and Gentiles alike, and by which we all become God’s children and brothers of each other.

- In the temple of Jerusalem, there were large courtyards for people to gather for worship. The outer courtyard was meant also for non-Jews who had adopted the Jewish religion. But between this outer courtyard and the inner ones reserved for born-Jews, there was a railing all along, with inscriptions warning non-Jews not to dare cross it over, under pain of death. One of those inscriptions was found recently during an excavation.

- In the face of divisions of that sort Paul tells us in the strongest terms, that through his death, Jesus pulled down that barrier. Jew and Gentiles, nay all mankind, had now become a single family. The Holy Spirit given to them makes them so, all with equal rights, and all worshipping God together in a single prayer taught us by Jesus himself: “Our Father in heaven ...” (Mt. 6, 10)

The Spirit, says Paul, has made us all not just a single family, the family of God, but a single body, the Body of Christ (Eph. 2, 16). Christ is our common Good Shepherd leading us all to his Father.

By giving us his Holy Spirit, Jesus presented us with a precious gift: the gift of peace.

a) First, peace with his Father:

God was never at war with anyone; we became his enemies by Sin. But through his death on the cross Jesus reconciled us with God. In his letter to the Christians of Colossae, Paul powerfully expresses this our reconciliation with the Father in the following terms: “Jesus cancelled every record of the debt we had to pay ... by nailing it to the cross” (Col. 2: 14).

b) Secondly, Jesus brought peace among all people:

If the Spirit makes us all children of the same Father, and truly brothers and sisters of one another, who will dare divide us into groups again? All differences which people may create have no longer meaning. If the member of earthly families ought to keep united, how much more ought we whom the Spirit has turned into members of God’s own family?

5. The fact of belonging to Jesus’ flock imposes a serious obligation on shepherds and sheep alike: to maintain peace and unity within the Christian community:

Dissension within the community makes no sense; in fact, it is a most serious sin, especially when it is caused by shepherds who now have gone astray through their pride or greed or other personal interests and sins. It is a betrayal of one's vocation, similar to that of what Judas did to Jesus, now a betrayal of the Body of Christ today.

If God loves us all, if we all profess the same Christian faith, if the same Spirit has been given to us all, and all without exception are called to share the same joy in heaven, where we shall love each other for all eternity, what sense does it make to be at odd with one another here below? Isn't it very bad when divisions are promoted for the sake of satisfying one's own inordinate passions?

God brought us into his own family. Nothing hurt parents more than to see their children divided; nothing displeases God more than to see us, Christians, dividing the Body he loves and for which he laid down his life.

No two of us are equal; we differ in age, features, intelligence, wealth, education and so on; but on becoming Christians so many and so precious are the gifts we receive in common, that human differences should count no longer.

There is a further consideration to be kept in mind: God saves us one by one, but not in isolation; he saves us within a flock, within a family. On our way to heaven, led by Christ, our shepherd, we either walk in peace and harmony with the rest of the sheep or we are sure to miss the way.

- We ought to question ourselves time and again: what kind of Christians are we? There is a simple way to find the correct answer: we are good Christians to the extent to which we add to the peace and unity in the community. Are we at all times the peace-sowers and the peacemakers that Jesus wants us to be?

Let us therefore pray: father in heaven, we thank you for having sent your Son Jesus to lead us to you; help our shepherds to be faithful to the work you have entrusted to them and help us all to live in mutual love, peace and unity. We ask this through Christ our Lord, Amen.