

16th ORDINARY SUNDAY OF THE YEAR: JULY 19th
Jeremiah 23:1-6; Mark 6:30-34

Jeremiah 23:1-6

This prophecy was probably uttered during the reign of Zedekiah and it picks up a major theme of Jeremiah's. It was a time of great intrigue and many of the lesser kings of the smaller nations around Israel were plotting against the King of Babylon. There were problems in Mesopotamia and word had come out that there was a rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and that the empire was in trouble. The pressure was on Zedekiah to join the revolt but both Jeremiah and Ezekiel were urging him to keep away from politics and to concentrate on serving Yahweh their God. Babylon was, in their terms, an instrument being used by God to purify the nation. But it was all to no avail. In the end, it was politics and the lure of power that led him to join with his neighbours and throw off the yoke of Babylon. And, sadly, it was all to no avail the King of Babylon was not overthrown and he invaded the land, destroyed most of the small nations and took the people off in chains into exile.

When Jeremiah speaks of the bad shepherds who are not caring for the people of God as they should, he has in mind the last four kings of the nation, but also the nobles, the priests and the prophets whose primary duty it was to care for the people. They had paid only lip service to this, however, and were more interested in looking after their own needs and their own comforts. They were bad shepherds in every way. The sheep, the people of God, were scattered, broken and on the way to disaster because the shepherds had failed in their duties.

These men were supposed to "shepherd" God's people. In Hebrew this word has a wide range of meanings: look after, go to see, take care of, long for, muster and so on. It implies a close and intimate relationship with the sheep, a relationship that requires a lot more than just their temple duty. The sentence God passes on them is a tough one: *Ok then, you have not watched over them but I am watching you and I am going to punish you for your wrongdoings.* It was clear that at the time Jeremiah was preaching, these bad shepherds were still going about their business and remained unaware that at the very time they were rejoicing in their power and as they thought they were in control of things, God was putting into place those forces that would bring them crashing to judgment.

But having the flock of God scattered, reduced in size and even living in a foreign land should not bring a sense of despair to the hearts of the faithful Hebrew. God is going to punish the arrogant shepherds but he will himself gather the faithful remnant from wherever they find themselves scattered. This is something God will do. It is even stronger than that. Here we find God pledging himself to gather the people together from wherever they find themselves residing. They are being punished for their rebellion but the real blame goes to those who have the responsibility for leading them in safe and peaceful ways.

God declares that he will send them good shepherds to bring them home. These would be men who would not live for themselves but rather would give all of their time and energy to the sheep they are called to care for and would be faithful to God in all things. There will be one shepherd in particular who would be the "Branch for David" or a new shoot from David's line. This shepherd is going to be a King – so he will have power and authority but he will also be filled with wisdom and so know how to use that power. The last thing they want is another politically motivated leader who will bring them more suffering and pain. This shepherd will be a servant king and will be chosen, raised up and empowered by God himself. He will not have to rely on political alliances and will have the power of God driving his success. His ministry will be marked by a sense of justice and righteous living. It is from this that his power will derive and not from any sense of rank and human achievement.

Mark 6:30-34

There are a couple of things that form the background to today's Gospel reading. The first is the story of Herod's murder of John the Baptist. Herod is the gospel equivalent of the "bad shepherds" we just heard about in Jeremiah's prophecy. He thought that all politics and religion should revolve around him and that he should be recognized as a great king by the people. That is why the rough and tumble John the Baptist was such a threat to him. John was popular. He wandered around preaching and teaching, lived a rough kind of life, offered hope and the promise of a coming Kingdom and would not bow before Herod's arrogance. Herod tried to win John over by flattery and when that did not work, he used politics, guile and violence. He was truly a bad shepherd who was more interested in himself than his people. This kind of shepherd stands in strong contrast to the Good Shepherd who cares for his flock and who feeds them in their hunger. He is also different from the apostles, who as shepherds care for the people of God by teaching them, by setting them free from evil spirits and curing them of their illnesses.

Then there was the story of the twelve going out preaching the Gospel, casting out demons and healing people of their illnesses. It was a mirror reflection of the ministry of Jesus. They understood that being called to be a disciple of Jesus meant a life of constant "going out", of living with the constant and ever changing vagaries and uncertainties of the journey and travelling in total dependence on God to provide for their every need. Being faithful to this kind of ministry was tiring, demanding and left them in need to refreshment. There was also a danger that these shepherds could begin to see themselves as being special and above the people they were called to serve. Having all that power could be an ego trip and so it was necessary that they come away for a while, return to being with their Lord and master and be revived by living in his presence. Ministry, after all, was about Jesus and not about the apostle.

The language here is strong. The disciples "need" to get away. The focus now is not on the people in need but on the needy, fragile apostles. This is a great image. The apostles were in need. They were exhausted and presumably this was a mental and spiritual exhaustion as well as a physical state of exhaustion. There is only so much a human being can do on his or her own and that is all that is expected by God. The rest is up to God but the key thing is to listen to the Saviour calling them aside. He takes them away from what they are doing, away from the crowds and from their places of work so that they can be with him in a quiet place. This is not something you would get from Herod. Herod was complete unto himself – or so he thought. He was blind to his needs and that is why he was such a bad shepherd.

But escaping the needs of the people of God is not easy and the twelve did not have much of a chance to be by themselves. Hungry people were soon all around them and in this way Mark brings us to his next story – the feeding of the five thousand. What Mark says is so true – there are always hungry people around and even if you were to get into a boat and sail across the lake, they would be there waiting for you.

Conclusion:

For the third or fourth week now we have been reminded of a key biblical theme through our Old Testament readings. The people, led by their kings, bad priests and false prophets, were looking for an easy way of serving their God. They expected that being God's people would mean that their lives would be free of pain and difficulty, that God would solve all of their problems. This is why they hated the prophets who came along and told them that they would have to get off their collective bottoms and work along with God. They had to get out and actually live what the Covenant expected of them. It was not enough to call themselves

Hebrews. They had to live in way God expected a Hebrew to live. If not, they would wither and die.

The other tough message was that God could still be their God if the Babylonians ruled over Israel and the king of Babylon set up his throne in Jerusalem. The people, however, could not accept this and the kings were not prepared to put aside any of their power and glory and live under another king. Life was not meant to be like that. But that is what happened. Their sins destroyed the nation and they had to learn to worship God on the Tigris and the Euphrates rives instead of on the Jordan. The key thing was not where to worship God but to worship him in whatever they were doing.

Then there is the Gospel theme of the arrogant ruler who was a power in his own right. He did not need God. He did not need to step down from his throne and go and walk with Jesus in a quiet and secluded place. But the apostles did. They needed to take time out to be with Jesus. Not just to rest themselves but to ensure that their ministry was the ministry of Jesus. That what they did mirrored what Jesus was doing and how he was doing it. Without this stopping and refreshing, they could easily become arrogant and proud and miss what it was Jesus truly wanted and how he wanted them to do it.

We are no different today. We too need to be sure that the way we live out our discipleship is the way Jesus wants it. That our ways are God's ways and that the world around us finds God alive in all that we do, think and say. Each of us, in our own ways, is called to be a shepherd, bringing food, shelter, a warm welcome and a sense of being a part of God's flock to all we meet. But we need to be shepherds in the way of Jesus and not in the way of Herod. If we live in any other kind of way, then God's flock will be scattered and torn apart by wolves. Our hope rests in a God who will gather us back together in Jesus, heal our wounds, calm our fears, feed our hungers and send us on our way once again.