

the Sunday Readings



As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd and he began to teach them many things. (Mark 6 : 34)

16th Sunday Ordinary Time (b) **Caring Foundation Sunday**

16th Sunday Ordinary Time (b)

*hunger for God's reigning*¹

introduction

After completing one stage of their task, the disciples gather around Jesus to assess what they have accomplished. Jesus invites them to, "*Come away . . . rest a while.*" People are coming from everywhere, even arriving ahead of the disciples at the place where they were going. Mark presents Jesus' human reaction. When he sees the crowds approaching, eager to hear him, he had compassion for them. Sensitive to the people who are, "*like sheep without a shepherd*", Jesus began to teach them many things.

first reading: Jeremiah 23: 1 – 6²

[restoration after exile & the righteous branch of David]

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord.(1) Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord.(2) Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.(3) I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.(4) The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.(5) In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."(6)

One of the most radical texts in the Scriptures occurs in Jeremiah. The prophet poses the question; '*What makes a leader?*' He answers his own question by referring to Josiah, affirming that he was indeed a true leader. What made Josiah so, was that he practised justice and righteousness in his care of the poor. That's what makes a government real. Jeremiah had been discussing the characteristics of legitimate power. In other words; '*how could kings be kings?*' And he appealed to the people's experience of two recent leaders; King Jehoiakin's wickedness stood in total contrast to his father Josiah's righteousness.³ Josiah was a true leader because he practised justice and took care of the poor.

1 Cover Image: [Jesus' Sermon on the shore](#)

2 The biblical excerpts are drawn from the New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), published by Oxford University Press (1994).

3 *Jr.22:13ff*

The Scriptures use the word, *'shepherd'*, for anyone in authority – including prophets and kings.⁴ The Lord is the chief shepherd. The king only rules on the Lord's behalf. Jeremiah is spokesman of the Lord's future for the Israelites.⁵ The prophet affirms that the Lord cares and would gather together the scattered people and give them a new leader, or shepherd, like David. Jeremiah is convinced that there are other possibilities. He has a vision of good and bad figs.⁶ He acts as the Lord's spokesman announcing that the deportees are indeed bad figs; yet they are the special people – the wave of the future – the very ones who seem most sharply under punishment. Jeremiah senses where the long-term movement of the historical process is headed. He asserts a sure end of Judah, the temple and the monarchy.

Yet he still finds a way of speaking of a future – precisely out of that failure. He speaks of a new leader emerging from the chaos. Under this leader, Israel and Judah will become a united people of God. New leaders are vital to the Lord's rescue plan. They are part of the prophetic promise. For a battered but not hopeless people, King Jehoiakin's evilness stands in total contrast to his father Josiah's righteousness. Josiah proved the true leader (v.6).⁷

response: Psalm 23 : 1 – 6

[the divine Shepherd]

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.(1)
 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
 He leads me beside still waters;(2) He restores my soul.
 He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.(3)
 Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
 I fear no evil; for You are with me;
 Your rod and Your staff – they comfort me.(4)
 You prepare a table before me
 in the presence of my enemies;
 You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.(5)
 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
 and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.(6)*

The Lord is both shepherd and host at a banquet.⁸ The speaker expresses the religious tradition of the people of the covenant. The *'still waters'* (v.2) suggest that the Lord, the true shepherd, plays host in the temple. Having first guided the

4 In Jeremiah's time the people of *the northern kingdom (Israel)* had been deported to Assyria. The elite of *the southern kingdom (Judah)* had been taken off to Babylon. The kings proved not to be true shepherds when the people were confused and scattered.

5 Jr. 23:1-4

6 Jr. 24:1-11

7 [v.6] *'The Lord is our righteousness'* – is probably an ironic wordplay on the name of the weak King Zedekiah (*"The Lord is righteousness"*); the Messianic Ruler will be in reality what Zedekiah's name falsely proclaims him to be.

8 [v.1] *My shepherd*: The Lord as *good shepherd*, is common in both Testaments (Cf. *Ezk.34:11-16; Jn.10:11-18*).

speaker through difficult and perilous pathways, the Lord now restores the spirits and feeds the guest, at the sacrificial meal. The Biblical theme '*dwelling in God's house*' was one of the Lord's great gifts to the covenant people (v.6).⁹

The speaker addresses the ending of an exile – a return home – trusting in the Lord's '*shepherding*'. The strangely-given manna,¹⁰ and the wilderness tradition of God's steadfast protection in the face of every threat to life,¹¹ is the memory reaffirmed here. Deathly valleys and enemies are not denied. But such threats can't hurt, because the powerful loyalty and solidarity of the Lord comforts and protects – especially in these situations of risk. The Lord's comforting ended exile.¹² The speaker affirms the ending of the wilderness experience. Access to the temple – where life and goods resided and life is newly ordered. It marks the end of being in the wilderness.¹³ It's the vitality of the Lord's relationship with the people that transforms them, rather than the place. The temple comes only as the consolidation of the relationship. A life of worshipful praise is the secure location in which to live a trustful life.¹⁴

second reading: Ephesians 2: 13 – 18

[about being one in Christ]

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.(13) For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.(14) He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace,(15) and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.(16) So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near;(17) for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.(18)

In the letter, there's a reference to the temple divisions. These were the human expression of the hostility, or enmity, that had to be dealt with if there was going to be true liberation for the disciples of Jesus. Jesus is *the One* who reconciles the existing hostility. Gentiles lacked Israel's messianic expectation and the various covenants the Lord made with Israel. They lacked hope of salvation and knowledge of the true God.¹⁵ But through Christ all the religious barriers

9 [v.6] '*Goodness and mercy*' – the blessings of God's covenant with Israel.

10 Ex.16:18

11 Dt.2:7ff

12 Cf. Is. 40:1-2

13 [v.5] '*You prepare a table before me*' – this expression occurs in an Exodus context in Ps.78:19. '*As my enemies watch*' – my enemies see that I am God's friend and guest. '*Oil*' – a perfumed ointment made from olive oil, used especially at banquets (Ps.104:15; Mt.26:7; Lk.7:37, 46; Jn.12:2).

14 As in many of the psalms, there is a courtroom flavour to this psalm. If the '*ravine as dark as death*' (v.4a) is the experience of being falsely accused, then the earlier verse becomes a confession of innocence against slanderers (v.3). The Lord is the advocate in defence of the innocent. The Lord's advocacy evokes trust.

15 Eph. 2:11-12

between the Israelites and the Gentiles have been transcended (vv.13-14) by the abolition of the Mosaic covenant-law (v.15) for the sake of uniting Israelite and Gentile into a single religious community (vv.15-16). That new humanity, imbued with the same holy Spirit and worshipping the same Father (v.18) means that the Gentiles are now included in God's household.¹⁶

The author praises Christ's work of reconciliation. All the characteristics of the Messiah are evident in Jesus' work – the peace-making among those formerly hostile; a new creative power in evidence in his healings; his reconciling; and his opening up access to God – are all in agreement with the Israelite prophetic tradition about the behaviour of the Messiah. The people being '*far off*' or '*near*' (v.17) refer respectively to being '*non-Israelites*' and '*converts*'. By his sacrifice, Jesus has united the Israelites and other nations (v.16). They are reconciled to God and to one another through the peace achieved by the cross of Christ. Before Jesus' coming, non-Israelites were outside Israel's privileges. They were worldly, despairing and without the real God. Jesus broke down the barriers that were barring them of access to God (vv.14-15).¹⁷ The barriers mentioned was probably a reference to the wall that separated the court of the Hebrews from the non-Hebrews in the temple area.¹⁸

A religion based on all kinds of rules and regulations (about hand washing and about how many steps could be taken on the Sabbath) could never be a universal religion. Jesus ended all this. According to the author, Israelite and non-Israelite can now find their way to the Father in the same spirit (v.18). Gentiles are now included in God's household (v.19). God's new household rises on the foundation of apostles helped by those with prophetic gifts,¹⁹ the preachers of Christ (v.20),²⁰ With Christ as the cornerstone (v.20),²¹ they are being built into the holy temple of God's people where the divine presence dwells (vv.21-22).

gospel reading: Mark 6 : 30 – 34 [Jesus has compassion for the demands of the crowd and continues teaching]

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.(30) He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.(31) And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.(32) Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.(33) As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and

16 Eph. 2:19

17 [v.15] '*One new humanity*' – a corporate body – the Christian community, made up of Jews and Gentiles and replacing ancient divisions (cf. Rm.1:16).

18 [vv.14-16] The imagery here combines pictures of Christ as *our peace* (Cf. Is.9:5), his crucifixion, *the ending of the Mosaic law* (Cf. Col.2:14), *reconciliation* (2 Co.5:18-21), and *the destruction of the dividing wall such as kept people from God* in the temple, or a barrier in the heavens.

19 Eph. 3:5

20 Cf. 1 Co.12:28

21 Cf. Is. 28:16; Mt. 21:42

he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.(34)

The crowd are seeking 'a shepherd' – a *guide* or *leader*. We may speculate about what Jesus taught by considering the report of what followed that evening. Most likely he spoke about *the reigning of God* and his followers' need to multiply their giving of themselves. Later, the crowd will share a meal of bread and fish. The crowd desire a leader. Jesus stresses that sharing, cooperation, and giving of oneself, are the way of the reigning of Heaven.

Jesus had earlier sent out the Twelve disciples to spread his message around Galilee.²² Now the Twelve return to tell Jesus of the response among the people of Galilee.²³ But the crowds force them to withdraw. Jesus draws people to himself like a magnet attracts iron filings (v.31). The crowd are seem irresistably drawn to him and his disciples. It seems enough only to be in contact with Jesus for people to receive a kind of charge! Bodies that had been prostrate under heavy burdens are put back on their feet.²⁴

The practise of Jesus and his disciples offered the crowd something that the distant temple and the religious practises associated with the temple, failed to deliver. Jesus' teaching creates a counter-force to the power of the temple. The immediate effect of this popularity seems to be the danger that the disciples will be deflected from their real work of announcing *the reigning of Heaven* because of the heavy demands on their time and energy.

Trips by boat usually permit Jesus to have some breathing space, either to escape the crowds, or to clarify his teaching and actions to the disciples (vv.32-33). On this occasion it's as if Jesus feared the disciples might have their heads turned by their new-found popularity. Several times the gospels mention that crowds wanted to take Jesus and make him their leader by force. The disciples were not above thinking this was their '*main chance*'. But Jesus' project and that of the crowd, were not the same. He takes great pains to clarify that to his disciples. During the boat-crossing interludes, he further reveals the full meaning of his teaching and practise. Jesus' practise begins to make sense – only if he is the Messiah. The disciples observe Jesus in action, and they begin to share his practise. The power released by their practise attracts the crowds.

22 Mk. 6:7ff

23 [v.30] '*Apostles*' – here and in some manuscripts at Mk.3:14, Mark calls *apostles* (i.e., *those sent forth*) *the Twelve*, whom Jesus sends as his emissaries, empowering them to preach, to expel demons, and to cure the sick (Mk.6:13). Only after Pentecost is the title used in the technical sense.

24 Jeremiah had promised a new sort of leader who would reverse the destructive way society of his time and would restore to people their dignity and purpose (Jr. 25:5-6).

Jesus' attempt to avoid being dogged by the crowd, ends when he sees the crowd's need for guidance (vv.34).²⁵ He had originally intended to take the disciples aside, *'by themselves'*, a term that usually indicates a special revelation limited to the disciples only. The crowd prevents Jesus and the disciples from escaping. The crowd's vigorous seeking out of Jesus, changes the course of the story. Eventually it leads to a multiplying of loaves and fish (vv.39-44).

for sharing:²⁶

- *The restoration after exile; the righteous branch of David. Comment on Jeremiah 23:1-6*
- *About being one in Christ. Comment on Ephesians 2:13-18*
- *Jesus has compassion for the demands of the crowd and continues teaching them. Comment on Mark 6:30-34*

prayer:²⁷

*Compassionate God, from far and near
You gather Your Church into one.
Safeguard the unity of Your flock
through the teaching of Christ the Shepherd,
that all Your scattered children may find in him
the guidance and nourishment they seek.
We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

25 [vv.31-34] The withdrawal of Jesus with his disciples to a desert place to rest attracts a great number of people to follow them. Toward *this people of the new Exodus*, Jesus is moved with pity; he satisfies their spiritual hunger by teaching them many things, thus gradually showing himself the faithful shepherd of a new Israel; (cf. *Nb.27:17; Ezk.34:15*).

26 Lectio Divina: reading God's Word in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us: The practise of *lectio divina* requires a quiet space, a passage of scripture and the willingness to give time to the project. The passage used should be short. For the purpose of this leaflet, we suggest using the gospel reading of the up-coming Sunday. There are four steps in the traditional practise of *lectio divina*. The steps don't have to have the following order: *lectio (reading)* – read the passage of Scripture read slowly - more than once. If a particular word, phrase, or sentence seems significant (even if you don't know why) you may want to write it down. *meditatio (reflection)* – let the significant words fill your mind without straining to analyse them. We are in God's presence and so let the Holy Spirit lead your understanding of the words. *oratio (prayer)* – allow your heart to speak to God, in words inspired by the passage of Scripture, or by the thoughts that have come to you, while reflecting on it. *contemplatio (rest)* – let go of ideas and words and allow yourself to rest in the presence of God, in simple and wordless contemplation. This leaflet gives the context and some commentary on each of the readings and the psalm used in the Sunday's liturgy. Familiarity with the texts and the commentary beforehand, can better prepare our hearing and understanding the passages in our worship. Whatever our preparation for doing this exercise and whatever questions we may use to break open the passage, we must be conscious of Christ's promise: *'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them'*

27 The prayer that concludes the Lectio Divina is ICEL's 1998 opening prayer from the Proper of the Day. These prayers draw upon the concrete and vivid images of Scripture and conclude with a clearly focused petition inspired by the readings.

review:²⁸

In our Eucharistic liturgy, the Word of God leads into our sacramental sharing of food. Like the crowds attracted to Jesus and hungering to hear his teaching, in our liturgy we stand on the threshold of God's reigning. The moment of worship in faith, when *the Word of God* is heard and internalised in the food of the Eucharist, can transform us, our neighbourhood and our world. Jesus led his disciples to share bread with those who hungered for *the Bread of Life* (vv.36–44).

The early community of disciples continued the practise of sharing Word and Eucharist in their practise of telling of Jesus' practise by their practise and sharing their resources with those in need. In the absence of his person, the action of sharing what they are, is all we present disciples of Jesus have. In the absence of Jesus' person, the actions of disciples restore a basic equality between rich and poor, so that the differences between rich and poor are destroyed. Today that means everyone has a contribution to make to the welfare of all. Such an economy would be different to our present economy – but it would be a very good economy.

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28 The review – at the end of each reflection the review examines one of the themes of the readings, usually drawn from the gospel, and provides an opportunity to check our own performance, in the light of the Word and Eucharist that we have previously heard and experienced.