Dear Friends,

Lessons on the ‘Other side’

Today’s Gospel passage presents the sympathetic and merciful heart of Jesus who lovingly invites the apostles to a desolate place for some rest. This passage is transitional in Mark. It brings to a close the first mission of the twelve (6:7 - 13) which we reflected on last week and is a prelude to the story of the feeding of the five thousand (6:34 - 44). Jesus had sent his apostles on their first healing, teaching, and preaching mission to prepare the people they visited for the Coming of the Promised One, Jesus. When they returned, they were no doubt exhilarated by the experience. The ordinary people that they were, experienced extra-ordinary miracles worked in the name of Jesus. Nonetheless, they were hungry, exhausted, and in need of rest, both physical and spiritual. In fact, Jesus was eager to hear about their missionary adventures as they proudly shared their experiences. But Jesus, too, needed a break from the crowds who were constantly pressing in, demanding attention and healing. Hence, he led the Apostles by boat to a “deserted place” on the other side of the Lake intending to give them all a period of rest and sharing.

The pressure of the crowd is a ‘Marcan motif’. The large number precluded any respite for the disciples. Moving with alacrity and determination, they arrive at the destination on foot ahead of the disciples by boat. Lake Galilee or Lake Tiberias in Hebrew is known by its biblical name, Yam Kinneret, “Sea of Kinnereth”. The name may originate from the Hebrew word kinnor (“harp” or “lyre”) - which the lake’s shape resembles. At its widest spot it is just 8 miles. So, we can imagine how a group of people could walk along the shore to meet a boat that was sailing across. There is no shade of annoyance in Jesus’ attitude despite the crowd’s thwarting his desire to rest. He begins to teach at once, bringing to life the prophetic word of Jeremiah and others that Yahweh’s people would be shepherded (Num 27:17, Ez 34:5f).

Today’s gospel bears many of those vivid features of Mark’s Gospel. It is one of those rare instances where Jesus’ stated intent is thwarted by the needs of the crowd. His desire to be alone with the disciples after the excitement and enthusiasm of their first mission could not be realized. What a striking lesson as Jesus puts personal concerns aside because of his pastoral concern for others. Today’s Gospel teaches that the mission of the Church should be based on the Gospel of compassion we seek to live and share.

Most of us are generally willing to help or to be present to others, but very often it is on our terms. We have an agenda which we like to have respected without undue disturbance. We do not like to be taken off-guard. The unforeseen easily becomes an irritant. But shepherding (ministry to others) in the church, which today embraces many people in diverse ministries, calls for a Christ-like openness and responsiveness. How we do things is as important as what we do. This call to ministry is a call by Christ to every believer. When it came to being inconvenienced for the good of others, Jesus gave us all a sterling example of self-sacrifice. This is one of the lessons that his disciples learned ‘on the other side’ and we need to make it a learned experience in our personal lives as well.

Be blessed, Fr. Tom Kunnel C.O.

July 18, 2021

16th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
FIRST READING
I myself will gather the remnant of my flock from all the lands to which I have driven them and bring them back to their meadow; there they shall increase and multiply. (Jer 23:9)

PSALM
The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want. (Ps 23)

SECOND READING
In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ. (Eph 2:13)

GOSPEL
When he 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. (Mk 6:34)


GOSPEL MEDITATION
Encourage Deeper Understanding of Scripture

There's an ordinary pine grove located on a tree farm not too far from town where life's stresses and demands seem to melt away. It is here that all that seemed so important out there no longer is and one can get lost in the rows of trees and majestic beauty. God is here and all is good. We need to connect with the Divine Source of all that is in order to understand what it is we are doing and why we are doing it. Otherwise, things stop making sense and bitterness can overcome one's spirit. It's okay to play once in a while and to discover that place of profound life and peace. People always have needs and there is constantly something to do. And while all of that is necessary and we are needed, there is also that inner solitude within that needs to be celebrated and released.

We all need a pine grove. It's that little place we can go and leave all that consumes us behind. It's a place where technology can be set aside and wonder, and awe given some time. We don't have to text, calculate, or orchestrate anything in the pine grove. It is a somewhat deserted place where all of that can be set aside and we can just be. The anger, frustration, exhaustion, discouragement, helplessness, and occasional apathy, all can fall to the ground like all of those pine needles that once held their place on the branch of a Frasier Fir. The needles can let go. We can let go. We are beings connected with Being and we all need to remember what really matters, who really matters and what life is truly all about. We need to find that place where we can rest and let go of all of the barnacles we accumulate. Rest, breathe, seek, and love.

The world will need us again when we leave the pine grove. It will all be waiting for us, beckoning for our attention. But we will have prayed and will have marveled at the silence and the beauty of goodness. We can go back, ready, and eager to listen, to help, to heal, to cry, to embrace, and attend to all that is asked of us. But, having let go of the distractions in that deserted place we will have a renewed sense of purpose. We will know better Who it is we serve and what we are meant to do. It will all be clearer now that we have been Divinely touched and refreshed.
The first reading, Jeremiah 23:1 - 6

The chronicles of the kings of Judah present a disappointing picture of the Davidic kingship, the line which was the channel of prophetic hope (2 Sam 7) and cultic promise (Ps 2; 45). Jeremiah is an exponent of the corruption and neglect which these leaders had visited on their people (ch. 22). Today’s passage breaks from the litany of faithless kings as it looks to the future. After issuing his “Woe” to these past kings (vv1f), the prophet speaks of an era of restoration (vv3f) to be presided over by a messianic king, who will represent everything that his predecessors failed to be (vv5f).

The first duty of the king in a theocratic state was to uphold the interests of the deity, in this case, fidelity to the covenant and instruction in Torah. However, Judah’s kings had been guilty of social injustice, luxurious living, and a variety of corrupt practices (22:13f, 17). Their people had been deprived of guidance and been sorely mistreated (v2; Ez 34:4 - 10).

Therefore, Yahweh himself will act as shepherd, first in restoring the people to their homeland by bringing the exile to an end (v3; 29:14; 32:37), and then by raising up kings faithful to the Davidic ideal (3:15; Ez 34:11 - 16).

This will be a time of joy for both kingdoms, with both north and south consistently present to Jeremiah’s prophetic consciousness (cc. 30 - 31). The Lord our justice (v6): The ideal king is so designated because in his person God’s saving justice in fidelity to his promises becomes evident (16:14f; Is 9:5f; 45:25; Ps 103:6). There is also a play on the name of the actual king of Judah, Zedekiah, in the repeated use of the word sedeq*, implying, not too subtly, that the future king will be everything that the present one is not.

* ‘righteous one’

The second reading, Ephesians 2:13-18 In this reading, Paul celebrates the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy (first reading) of a future shepherd who would gather the dispersed and the scattered into one people of God. This passage explains how Christ has brought about reconciliation between ancient enemies, the Jews and the Gentiles. Paul says that the Jews had been “near” and the Gentiles “far off.” But by becoming Christians, those Jews, who had enjoyed God’s favor for so many generations, have now accepted Christ as their Messiah. The converted Gentiles had long been estranged from God in their worship of pagan gods, but they, too, have now accepted Christ as their Lord and Savior. Hence, as Christians, the Jewish converts and the Gentile converts are enemies no more but brothers and sisters, one in Christ. The Law of Moses “with its commandments and legal claims” was serving to separate the Jewish converts who kept it from the Gentiles who didn’t know of it and didn’t. Against the attempts by some Jewish Christians to impose the Mosaic Law on Gentile converts, Paul affirms that the Law could no longer separate God’s single people into factions.

GOSPEL INSIGHTS

- “Sheep without shepherd:”

But when they came ashore there was a large crowd waiting for them. Jesus’ heart was moved with pity for those people who were “sheep without a shepherd.” Here the reference to the shepherd was probably to religious leaders, because at this time the Jews were an occupied people, and the real political power was in the hands of the pagan Romans. This brief description, “sheep without a shepherd,” is also dense with Biblical allusions. Like the people of Israel, the crowds were in the desert where they would receive not only miraculous food (next Sunday’s Gospel), but guidance and instruction, just as the Torah had been given in the desert of Sinai. “Sheep without a shepherd” will perish because a) they cannot find their way and will probably end up being eaten by a wolf or other carnivores b) they cannot find pasture, water, and food for themselves, and c) they have no defense against the dangers which threaten them. Jesus’ first act with these shepherd-less sheep was to teach them [v. 34], then to feed them [vv. 35-40], and finally to protect the apostles (who were also His sheep), from the storm [vv. 45-52]. This text affirms Jesus’ extraordinary availability and his compassion for the needy. It teaches us that a Christian should be ready to sacrifice his time and even his rest in the service of the Gospel.

To equip ourselves we need to turn to God. Prayer is essentially listening to God and talking to Him. One of our main problems is that we do not truly allow God the opportunity to speak to us. We also do not know how to “be still and listen.” Hence, we are often in danger of refusing to allow God to recharge us with spiritual energy and strength. In addition, we do not set aside enough time for God to speak to us and for us to speak to Him. Ministry without prayer is like shooting arrows without a target. But we can make better choices.
All people have a capacity for compassion.

Mencius, a Chinese philosopher who lived several hundred years before Christ and was eager to show that there is good in everyone, said, “All people have a capacity for compassion. If people see a child about to fall into a well, they will, without exception, experience a feeling of alarm and distress. This is not because they know the child’s parents, nor out of desire for praise … nor out of dislike for the bad reputation that would ensue if they did not go to the rescue. From this we may conclude that without compassion one would not be a human being.” — Mencius was right to say that compassion is a component of true humanity, but alas, recent wars have shown us that there are also those who would as soon throw a child into a well as to pull one out. Some people are so self-occupied that they don’t even notice those who are suffering. The compassion of which we are capable needs cultivating if it is to find expression. Following Christ is one way to nurture that characteristic. Flannery O’Connor, the insightful Catholic writer, lifted up the Christian dimension when she wrote: “You will have found Christ when you are concerned with other people’s sufferings and not your own.” The beginning of compassion involves becoming aware of the suffering of others. But it is not enough simply to see the suffering of others; we need to feel it.

We live in a mediated world where ‘spectacle’ is taking the center stage. Our TV shows are fast paced with images of war and cruelty, our children play very ‘cruel games’ and most tragedies are taken advantage of for political mileage. There is a great danger lurking in all these, as our hearts become numb to human suffering bereft of compassion. Made in the image and likeness of our compassionate God, our spiritual self will be parched dry as we are all wired for deep connection with God and His people. When we become deeply conscious of the fact that life is a gift, then we will begin to give more than we receive.

QUIZ TIME

1. Why was God upset with the “shepherds” in the first reading?
   a. They had scattered His flock
   b. They asked for too much money
   c. They fell asleep on the job
   d. They couldn’t tell sheep from goats

2. What does God promise the people in the first reading?
   a. A holy king
   b. A new Temple
   c. Freedom from the Romans
   d. Great wealth

3. Jesus broke down the wall of hatred between whom?
   a. Men and women
   b. Women and children
   c. Jews and Gentiles
   d. Romans and Greeks

4. Where did Jesus plan to take the Apostles in the Gospel?
   a. Jerusalem
   b. A place to go fishing
   c. The Temple
   d. A private place to rest

5. What does Jesus feel when He sees the crowd?
   a. Anger
   b. Confusion
   c. Compassion
   d. Surprise

Any Questions?

1. Is there any common theme in all three readings?
2. What can you do to create the quiet time that Jesus wanted for his disciples?
3. Discuss about the influence of media in your life.

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