

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC**  
**July 17, 2021**  
**16th Sunday of Year B    Mark 6:30-34**

We don't need to know much about sheep or about shepherds to get a sense of today's reading from the prophet Jeremiah. Shepherds were entrusted with the care of the sheep; they were to watch over them; they were to protect; they were to have the sheep's well-being as their first concern. Any breach of that trust; any using of the sheep for their own interests was a profound betrayal of trust.

This is the criticism that is leveled by Jeremiah against the rulers, the kings of Israel, who are often depicted in the Bible as shepherds. As rulers, they were supposed to shepherd, to take care of their people. Instead, they used them for their own advantage; they exploited them, they fleeced the flock. The rulers had a responsibility to lead, to give direction, but what they did was to enrich themselves at the expense of those they were supposed to serve. We have seen the same things happen in our own day, that those entrusted with a responsibility of providing guidance and direction have been looking after their own interests. We see it happening in the realm of politics and government, in the realm of finance and banking, and sadly even in the realm of religion. Still, Jeremiah promises the day will come when God shall provide One Who will rule wisely and well, whose reign, whose kingdom, will not be exploitative, but empowering, liberating, freeing. There are clergy of all denominations who have preyed upon the fears, the trust, the goodwill of members of their congregations for both financial and sexual gain.

Now let's turn to the Gospel to see what Mark has to say about Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Mark writes, "The apostles gathered together around Jesus and reported to Him all they had done and taught." The apostles have just returned from their first mission, wherein Jesus had sent them off on their own to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God, of God's reign, of God's rule, of God being the priority in one's life. What is different from the Kingdom of God, and all those other kingdoms we so readily subject ourselves to, is that the Kingdom of God is empowering, is freeing, is liberating. The other kingdoms, the "power-structures" of our society, to which we give our allegiance cater to our insecurities, our anxieties, our fears. They have a tendency to enslave us in our narcissism, our envy, our rage, our lusts, our fantasies. Because God is not out to exploit or use us, we can relax, we can be at peace, we can live, we can love. St. Irenaeus put it this way, "The glory of God is the human being who was fully alive." God only desires what is best for us.

In today's Gospel passage Jesus shows Himself to be the Good Shepherd. No doubt He is very interested in hearing what His disciples have to report to Him, now that they have returned from their first mission: how did people receive them; how receptive were people to their message; how did they feel after the whole experience. But as much as Jesus wants to be alone with His disciples, He realizes that the crowd nearby needs Him even more. St. Mark writes of Jesus, "His heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd," scattered, distracted, aimless, going this way and that. Mark recounts this scene by the lakeside because it depicts humanity that is perennially lost and searching, that is lured this way and that, that is so easily seduced by fake shepherds, until it hears the voice of the true shepherd, the Good Shepherd. So what does Jesus do? He puts his own agenda aside. The apostles can wait till later, the needs of the crowd come first. He will tell those in the crowd of the Kingdom of God—of how God loves them, of how they can begin to love each other in the same way. Jesus is the shepherd who tends to the needs of the sheep, rather than to His own needs. He is motivated to meet their needs, not His own.

What lessons can we learn for our lives from all the talk of shepherds and of sheep? Sometimes we are shepherds and sometimes we are sheep; sometimes we are the ones providing leadership and other times we are being led; sometimes we are care-takers and other times we are the ones being taken care of. So we have to be careful never to exploit or use those entrusted to our care, and those forms of exploitation can be very elusive and slippery, filled with all forms of self-deception, of self-aggrandizement. At the same time we have to be careful about those to whom we entrust our lives, even parts of our lives. We have to make sure that we are not being exploited. We ought never to be "users," nor should we allow ourselves to be used. There's an old American proverb that says, "Love many, trust few, always paddle your own canoe," i. e., be respectful of others and their well-being, but don't be gullible, don't be misled by false promises, and always take responsibility for one's actions. Again. "love many, trust few, and always paddle your own canoe."

Let us pray that we can learn to imitate Jesus, the Good Shepherd in how we attend to those entrusted to our care: spouses, children, parents, co-workers. Let us pray that we be generous, attentive and supportive; that we always strive after what contributes to their genuine well-being; that we show them that kind of love that truly comes from God.