

**The Lord is my shepherd, or
The Good Shepherd and the Suffering of the Innocent**
by Bill McCormick, SJ

*Woe to the shepherds
who mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture,
says the LORD.*

These words from this Sunday's first reading (Jeremiah 23:1-6) reminded me of recent newspaper headlines. The news of the graves of children found in Canada - 215 indigenous children at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia - rightly angered many. Who did this? Who must pay? What "shepherds" had treated these children so horribly?

For many Americans, this news came out of nowhere. For most Canadians, however, the discovery came after years of agonizing self-scrutiny and many other discoveries of crime and betrayal, culminating in a 2015 report from Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Americans might wish that this were a Canadian problem, but it's not: the US Church needs to prepare for similar revelations in the United States. In June, the US Secretary of the Interior announced plans for an investigation of Native American boarding schools in light of the Kamloops revelations.

The tragic findings at Kamloops point to a basic reality of life on this side of the eschaton: humans are deeply sinful, and mete out the worst injustices on each other, particularly the defenseless. Scandalously that does not exclude those of us who profess the Christian and Catholic faith.

And we must be honest: leaders bear a special responsibility for what happens in their communities, and thus a special blame for injustice. That is why Scripture is full of curses against bad shepherds, and a longing for good ones.

But news like that from Kamloops can make us wonder: is it foolish to long for good shepherds?

We should not expect our earthly rulers to become good shepherds anytime soon. And although we can and must expect justice from them, we should be skeptical of their claims to be good shepherds.

But we also cannot forget that Jesus indeed offers a different model, and is indeed our Good Shepherd.

*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.*

The Gospel of Mark records that Christ's "heart was moved with pity for them." It is hard to imagine a leader in our time so motivated. But Christ is, and we must remain close to Him.

And we can hope that, clinging to Him, we can give witness to a hope beyond hope, one in which the pain and suffering of innocent victims no longer disfigures our common life together. Our faith in Jesus has tangible public and social consequences. We must avoid becoming complicit in their suffering, and take steps to right unjust situations that oppress them.

Try as we might, we have to keep following Jesus, and we have to keep trying to live out our discipleship in community with others. Those others will inevitably disappoint us, and we will disappoint them. But we are not the Good Shepherd.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. And for that we owe Him thanks and praise.

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