

16th Sunday in ordinary time – Year B

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Ephesians 2:13-18; Mark 6:30-34.

In order to understand our first reading from the prophet Jeremiah today, we need to understand what has been happening in the history and practice of Israel. We need to go back a few hundred years. When the people of Israel first left the slavery of Egypt, and they moved to the Promised Land and began to settle there the Lord himself was their leader; he was their guide. For the first few generations, the Israelites had a series of leaders called Judges, which we read about in the book of Joshua and Judges. There came a time however, when the leaders of the people came to Samuel and asked him to let them have a King like all the other nations had. This of course should give us cause to pause. Israel was called to be different from all the other nations - not to be just like them. God wanted Israel to be unlike all the other nations around them. He wanted them to uphold justice and truth and virtue. He wanted them to be his people and to image him in the world.

We read this story in the first book of Samuel chapter eight. There the Lord instructs Samuel to do what the elders of the people ask him, even though the Lord said to Samuel “when they asked for a King they’re not rejecting you; they are rejecting me”. As you go through the history of Israel from this point, one of the striking characteristics of that history is the fact that the Kings who come to be the leaders of the people of Israel are always presented in the truth of who they are. So unlike other kingdoms and other peoples who tended to eulogise their kings and leaders – for example in the Roman Empire which even divinise their emperors – in the history of Israel the Kings, we are told, were lazy, corrupt, indifferent and pathetic leaders. And again and again the Lord sends prophets to correct them and to rebuke them. The passage that we have from the Prophet Jeremiah today is one example of that. There are others in the book of Isaiah, in the Psalms and most famously in the Prophet Ezekiel (chapter 34). Here the Lord rebukes the shepherds of Israel who have allowed his people to be scattered and lost. He says that he himself will gather his people by raising up shepherds who will pasture them without fear or terror. He then gives one of the great messianic prophecies of a new leader, who like King David of old, will rule with wisdom and integrity.

In the Gospel today (Mark 6:30-34) we see this prophecy come true. When the disciples return from their mission where they had relied completely on God (remember? - ‘take nothing for the journey’) they are tired and in need of a break. But the crowd that is there is now pressing in on every side and keeping them all so busy that they do not even have time to eat. So the Lord invites them to ‘come away and rest for a while’ and they set off across the lake in a boat. But they crowd are not so easily dodged, and they, along with an even greater crowd from all the towns and villages near by race ahead to meet him where they guess he is going – and so when Jesus arrives at that place he is confronted by this huge crowd and he has pity on them for they are like ‘sheep without a shepherd.’ So Jesus sets about teaching the people – the new role of the true shepherd – at some length. (So if you are annoyed when the priest’s homily goes on a bit, know that we are at least in this, following in the example of our master!)

Once again, however, we are confronted with the dilemma of what the true nature of the messiah – the leader of Israel was meant to be. If he was meant to be the one who gathered the people so that they could have a great victory over all the political enemies of Israel and they could once again resume the empire like in the days of King David and King Solomon – all of this seemed to be dashed

when Jesus did not only not raise an army against the powerful and oppressive Roman empire, but he was subjected to terrible torture and death at the hands of that empire. In order to understand how the early Church understood the way in which Jesus did in fact fulfil the call to be the true Shepherd and Messiah of Israel, we need to turn to the second reading.

St Paul continues his discussion about the amazing difference that was brought about by the ministry of Jesus – the Messiah. He addresses two groups of people in the verses before our reading today (in Ephesians 2:11-12) – those who were circumcised and those who were not. The first considered themselves close to God, because they have been following the law, and considered the others to be far away. But Paul addresses both and says that even you who were far away have been brought close by the blood of Jesus. Paul understands how the death of Jesus on the cross appeared to be the great defeat of any claim by him to be Israel's true Messiah. Appearances can be deceptive. For in fact, what happened on the cross, and through the blood of Jesus that was shed on the cross, was that the barrier which used to keep Jew and Gentile apart was broken down and destroyed. Paul knows that the deepest burden that any of us can carry, the greatest problem that any of us experience, is not oppression from outside as a result of political powers, but oppression from within – the oppression caused by sin, hatred, fear, prejudice, bitterness, unforgiveness... These are the walls and the barriers and the hostility that have been torn down because of the blood of Jesus that was shed on the cross. This is the way that Jesus demonstrated that he was to be our true leader and shepherd. This is the way that Jesus demonstrated what true shepherd leadership was all about.

Let us pray that we will always accept the true leadership that is offered to us by the Lord. Let us also pray for all those that the Lord has placed in leadership over us, that they will continue to model the true gift of leadership given to us in the Lord, and to always remember the great gift of King David – who ministered with the Father's heart. Only then will the cross of Jesus be able to achieve its work, and break down all barriers and hostility. Then we can be gathered together as God's one, true people united under one Shepherd.