

July 18, 2021

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mark 6:30-34

The apostles gathered together with Jesus and reported all they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while." People were coming and going in great numbers, and they had no opportunity even to eat. So they went off in the boat by themselves to a deserted place. People saw them leaving and many came to know about it. They hastened there on foot from all the towns and arrived at the place before them. 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.

Background:

The gospel text from last week described Jesus sending the Twelve out, entrusting them with his authority over unclean spirits, and exhorting them to preach repentance. The text concluded with a statement that they had been very successful. "The Twelve drove out many demons and they anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them." (Mark 6:13)

In the verses between last Sunday's gospel and this week's text, Mark reports that Jesus' reputation is spreading. Even King Herod has now learned of him. People are speculating whether Jesus might be Elijah raised from the dead. Herod himself believes that Jesus is John the Baptist come back to life. Then in the next 12 verses Mark reports in some detail how Herod had John the Baptist arrested and beheaded. Having described King Herod at his worst, Mark then turns our attention back to Jesus. In the gospel text for this week, Jesus receives his apostles as they return from their mission, and then he receives the crowd who pursued them even into deserted places. This sets the scene for next week's gospel in which Mark reports the feeding of this crowd.

This is the only place in Mark's gospel where the disciples are called apostles. The Greek word that is used here emphasizes the relationship between the one sending and the one being sent. The one being sent is sent as a representative of the one doing the sending. The person being sent has no authority of their own, only that given by the sender. When they return, they are expected to report as to the success of their mission. In the opening verse of our gospel, Mark states simply that the apostles reported back to Jesus all that they had taught and done in his name.

Jesus invited the disciples to escape with him to a deserted place. At the time of Jesus, 90 percent of the people lived in small hamlets of 50 to 150 persons. The people who formed these small communities were often relatives through numerous lines of interrelationships. In the economic structures of the day, these same people were the source for everything that was needed for survival. Privacy between people in these communities was nonexistent. The going and coming of people from other areas was noticed by everyone. They might bring something special, or they might bring some threat to the community, or they might bring news from the world beyond the small community.

The return of the twelve from distant places would be a reason for suspicion, curiosity, and hope of news from distant lands. Mark states that so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat. The reality may have been that they could not eat with so many guests. In this culture it would have been unthinkable to eat and not invite guests to join you (Mark 6:31b). Those who were aware of the return of the Twelve were also aware of their needing rest. Travel was difficult. Yet the people followed Jesus and the disciples.

If the return of the disciples was a cause for the local people to seek them out, their attempted escape to a deserted place would add another layer to the people's curiosity. The areas between villages and hamlets were a dangerous region of chaos. It would have been extraordinary that Jesus and the disciples would desire to escape into this area of chaos. The fact that so many of these people who lived their entire lives in one of these places

were willing to set out into the chaos is a window into the depth of their desire to know what Jesus and his disciples were doing.

The image of the people of Israel being like sheep without a shepherd appears several times in the Hebrew scriptures. This image would have been familiar to Mark's community. Moses prayed that Yahweh would send a new leader for the people so that they would not be like sheep without a shepherd (Nm 27:12). Ezekiel 34:1-31 uses the image to describe the people of Israel, when those who had been entrusted with the care of the people instead used the people and their possessions for their own benefit. The characterization of the people as being like sheep without a shepherd and Jesus beginning to teach them would have been seen as a criticism of the Jewish leadership who abandoned the common people and left them hungry for guidance.

Reflection Questions:

1. What is your experience of spending significant time with extended family?
2. Do you have experiences of hearing relatives tell stories of visiting distant lands?
3. What is your memory of the most crowded your home has ever been? How would that compare to what seems to be described in today's gospel?
4. What comes to mind when you think of a deserted place?
5. Imagine you are among the disciples and Jesus suggests that you join him in escaping to a quieter place. What is going through you as you hear Jesus' invitation?
6. What is the most striking aspect of this gospel for you? Can you take some time to talk with God personally about that aspect and especially your feelings toward Jesus, the disciples, and the neighbors who keep coming and coming?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

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Excerpts from the readings for July 18, 2021, the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture, says the Lord.
Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, against the shepherds who shepherd my people:
You have scattered my sheep and driven them away.
You have not cared for them, but I will take care to punish your evil deeds.
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.
I will appoint shepherds for them who will shepherd them
so that they need no longer fear and tremble; and none shall be missing, says the Lord.

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up a righteous shoot to David; as king he shall reign and govern wisely, he shall do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah shall be saved, Israel shall dwell in security. This is the name they give him: "The Lord our justice."

The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want. In verdant pastures he gives me repose; beside restful waters he leads me; he refreshes my soul. He guides me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk in the dark valley I fear no evil; for you are at my side with your rod and your staff that give me courage. You spread the table before me in the sight of my foes; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Only goodness and kindness follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for years to come.

Brothers and sisters: In Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, he who made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity, through his flesh, abolishing the law with its commandments and legal claims, that he might create in himself one new person in place of the two, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile both with God, in one body, through the cross, putting that enmity to death by it. He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

The apostles gathered together with Jesus and reported all they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while." People were coming and going in great numbers, and they had no opportunity even to eat. So they went off in the boat by themselves to a deserted place. People saw them leaving and many came to know about it. They hastened there on foot from all the towns and arrived at the place before them. 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.

Excerpts from Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 23:1-6; Ephesians 2:13-18; and Mark 6:30-34