

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 16 Year B 2024

The fourth Sunday of Easter each year is colloquially known as ‘Good Shepherd Sunday’. In the light of the resurrection, we pause to consider that wonderful, rich and evocative image as it is applied to our Lord. Christ, the Good Shepherd, who not only cares and protects his flock, but lays down his life for them. But so rich and important is that image that we can afford to revisit it, and that is what we are doing today. Both the Old Testament lesson from Jeremiah and the gospel from Mark direct us again to this most helpful way of understanding the person and ministry of Jesus.

The image of the Good Shepherd is evoked really only in passing in the reading today: *so as he stepped ashore he saw a large crowd; and he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd*. But even if just mentioned in passing - as a sort of incidental detail - it gives us so much insight both into the rest of the little passage we hear today, but also the whole of Jesus’ life and work. The key insight of this little passage we would all do well to heed and take to heart: *Christ desires for us our good*.

Now, as always it is important to remind ourselves where the text today comes from, the larger story into which it is part. To do that we need to look both forward and backward. Firstly, looking backward we recall the text placed before us last week as Jesus sent out his disciples two by two, commanding them to take nothing with them, to heal the sick and proclaim the good news of the kingdom. Today, we hear how those first missionaries have obeyed Jesus’ command and now return to him. Without doubt these first missionary journeys would have been stressful; they would have met difficult situations; they would have met with opposition (as promised) alongside their successes. And we could imagine it would have had it taken it out of them.

But it appears their busyness and activity escalates as they return to Jesus. We are told today that *there were so many people coming and going that the apostles had no time even to eat*. So, returning from an effective first mission, and then swamped by the crowds, Jesus calls his apostles away *to rest*.

Jesus *desires their good*. His concern for the Twelve reveals not only Jesus' simple humanity - that he recognises their limits, the need for stillness, quiet and solitude - but also his care, indeed his love, for them. Now, the 'lonely place' our Lord invites the apostles to withdraw to is better translated as 'desert place' or even 'wilderness'. Jesus is inviting his closest followers to leave behind for a time their busyness and activity, and to enter retreat with him, to rest with him. Jesus here is the pastor, the shepherd for his own. And it reflects that important human and spiritual truth: that to continue and sustain our work and mission we need time of nurture, of rest and recovery. Jesus will not push us beyond our means. He will not demand the impossible from us. *He desires our good*.

So, to make sense of the little gospel text today we look back. We see that Jesus' concern for his apostles is a response to the work and mission they have been engaged in. But we also look forward. And in looking forward we see today's passage serving really as a bridge. The crowds press in. Jesus seeks to withdraw, with his disciples. But the crowds guess where they are heading and get to the destination before him. It is in seeing this crowd that have so enthusiastically and insistently made their presence known that gives rise to the evangelist's comment: *Jesus had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd*. This then gives way to the passage which follows, and Mark's telling of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand. Now, we will not hear *that* story. Instead, from next week we will jump to *John's* telling of that story. Then for the following four weeks we will have a detailed exploration of Bread of Life discourse in John 6. That's what we are heading toward. More on how we will approach that significant text next week. Enough for us now to see that the apostles are physically hungry. They have had nothing to eat. The crowds are spiritually hungry, so Jesus feeds them with his teaching. The Good Shepherd who desires our good is the One who feeds us. And this desire comes from his wellspring of compassion.

The word 'compassion' used in the gospel today is a powerful one. The Greek word means something like '*moved to the depths of one's being*.' Jesus is not just feeling sorry for them. Or pity for them. He is stirred to his core.

He is not inspired to just give a handout or to offer a consoling pat on head. He is moved to the depths of his heart. It is the same word Luke uses to express the response of the Good Samaritan and the father of the Prodigal Son. It gives us insight into the quality of Jesus' care, the quality of his response. His desire for our good comes from the depths of his being.

It is perhaps the great tragedy of Christian life that so many act as if this were not true, or act indifferent to this truth. If we believe that Christ truly desires our good, then surely we will avail ourselves of the immense riches of grace he offers us! In the church, in the scriptures, in the sacraments, in the wealth of the tradition. I have said it before (but it is probably worth repeating!) that we will not endure, we will not be able to last to the end, if we exercise our faith in the minimum. Not only do we impoverish ourselves, it is *an offence* to God who is so lavish in his generosity, so generous in his provision.

We wonder perhaps why people fall away and fail to withstand the temptations and pressures of life around us. We wonder perhaps why our own spiritual life is so flat and unremarkable. It is very easy to be worn down by the cares of daily life, family life, work pressures, societal obligations. It is very easy to give up or chase after something more attractive and 'shiny'. If we do not regularly and faithfully avail ourselves to what Christ offers, our hunger will remain, and we may in fact starve ourselves. Our life of faith cannot be sustained either by accident or by causal indifference!

Now, this is not to argue for a work-based religion, as if by our own efforts and striving we can achieve something of the spiritual heights. On the contrary. It is to argue precisely for what is proposed in the gospel today. Christ desires our good, so accept the good things he offers! Just see in the short passage today the good things - the graces - Christ offers: He desires to lead us, to shepherd us; He desires for us to rest in him, with him; He desires for us to be fed with his living word and then (as we will hear in the coming weeks) his living body. The task of the Christian is simple. So simple we often overlook or over complicate it. The task of the Christian is to accept the gift! Accept the good things Christ offers, because, quite simply, he desires our good. Amen.