

Jesus our Shepherd our Salvation,

In today's gospel Mark is telling us that we have a Shepherd and a leader in Jesus. Jesus is both a powerful and determined leader, who is also a shepherd, willing to sacrifice his own needs out of compassion for those around him.

After Jesus sends the twelve on mission. John the Baptist is killed. Jesus feeds the five thousand and walks on water. These are all major events in Mark's narrative, so much so that the Gospel passage appointed for today seems to pale in comparison. Sure, Jesus heals many people in the end, but otherwise this passage seems to have missed the dramatic boat.

Mark's Gospel has a common theme, that Jesus Christ is the Messiah and the Son of God who came to earth to proclaim the kingdom of God and to suffer and die for the salvation of humankind. Mark's Gospel tells us that Jesus is a powerful and determined leader who overcomes evil.

The urgency of Mark's Gospel is reflected in the text for today. After the apostles' relay to Jesus all they had done and taught on their mission, he recognizes their need for rest, and calls them to Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while, for they had no leisure even to eat. They cross the Sea of Galilee in a boat, but they do not get the rest that Jesus prescribes for them, because many people saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them . A later passage depicts another crossing of the sea, where when they reach land, the people recognized Jesus at once, and they rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. The urgency of the gospel and of the people's need for it are too great to waste any time, and even more important at this moment than his own need to rest.

This underscores Jesus' identity as the true shepherd, the very inauguration of the divine kingdom. Seeing the great crowd, Jesus had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a Shepherd. These words echo Moses's prayer in Numbers 27, in which he asks God to appoint his successor, someone

“who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, so that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep without a shepherd”.

In Ezekiel 34, after rebuking the false shepherds of Israel, God reclaims God’s flock as their true shepherd. God will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice”. These things Jesus does. The crowds that follow and gather around him, the healings and casting out of demons, the miraculous feedings are all signs that the Son of God is shepherding the people into God’s kingdom. Indeed, Jesus proclaims in Mark 13:27 that on the last day he will gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. Mark is clearly identifying Jesus as the divine shepherd, who will gather his sheep from the places where they have been scattered.

Jesus, moved in compassion for these lost sheep, began to teach them many things. The food for which the people hunger is the very word of God, and in so feeding them Jesus shows himself to be a shepherd after God’s own heart, feeding God’s people with knowledge and understanding. What is more, he shows himself to be the divine shepherd, the very Son of God in whom the kingdom has come.

By healing the sick, the weakest and most vulnerable members of a community, Jesus is the powerful and loving Shepherd who subverts the economy of this world through the very inauguration of God’s kingdom. While the marketplaces of the world belong to the rich and powerful, in the kingdom of God this most political and commercial of spaces is occupied by those with the least. In the age to come, Jesus proclaims, many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. That age is now breaking into this age; we who seek to live God’s kingdom here and now must follow Jesus’ subversion of worldly power and wealth.

This reading reminds us to take time from our busy schedules to sit in the presence of the Lord in silence. To bring our concerns to Him for guidance and wisdom. He is always there for us to guide us and lead us, but we must first seek him out. Mark invites us to humbly recognize how, in the times of our anxiety, Jesus is the compassionate shepherd saviour who draws us aside to rest awhile him who makes time for us, who offers us protection and spiritual nourishment and, above all, healing for our souls.

Let us reflect with the guidance of the Holy Spirit on how we are called to be disciples of Christ.