

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
Sheep without a shepherd

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's been a tough week for a lot of people. Almost half of the Australian population is in lockdown because of Covid-19 outbreaks. For the Victorians, this is the fifth time around. For many, school holiday plans were interrupted, including not being able to visit family and friends interstate. All this on top of the usual challenges we may face in life. In our own parish we have people recovering from major surgery, and people waiting for their turn to come. We have people mourning the deaths of loved ones. In all of this, we need to know that someone's got our back, that we're not alone in whatever we're facing.

One of the strongest and most comforting biblical images when facing such difficult times is that of the good shepherd. There's a reason Psalm 23 is known and favoured by so many. It speaks of both provision and protection, and so it gives comfort to people in a wide variety of circumstances. This shepherd imagery in the bible is all throughout, and not just in this well-known psalm. And all throughout, the role of the shepherd is quite simple: provision and protection. It doesn't matter if we're talking literal sheep or metaphorical ones. The shepherd provides for the flock. And the shepherd protects the flock from harm. If the sheep are without a shepherd, then they are at great risk.

This is what Jesus encountered in today's Gospel reading from Mark 6. The people of Israel were not protected and not provided for. Jesus saw that the people of Israel were like sheep without a shepherd, and so had compassion on them. Now this phrase 'sheep without a shepherd' shows up a few times in the scriptures. In the Old Testament, it's always describing Israel's inadequate or oppressive leadership.

When God appointed Joshua as the successor to Moses after the Exodus, it was so that the Lord's people would not be like sheep without a shepherd. Moses specifically asked for good leadership to follow after him. Many years later, when Jerusalem was invaded in the time of the prophet Ezekiel, he prophesied a dire warning against the shepherds of Israel who used their position for their own gain and neglected the flock. A few years later again, the prophet Zechariah had similar warnings against those who led Israel out of exile and back into Jerusalem to rebuild and restore. Our reading today from Jeremiah promised responsible shepherds who will bring back the remnant of the flock and care for them.

It's important to realise that these passages are talking mostly about civil leadership. The 'shepherds' are the kings and governors and judges. We often default to a spiritual view of the shepherd, especially when talking of Jesus as the good shepherd. And the word 'pastor' is literally the Latin word for a shepherd. But when you read these passages of scripture about sheep without a shepherd, don't limit it to just the spiritual.

Consider the crowds in the gospel reading. Their shepherd, their king, who was supposed to protect them and provide for them was Herod. And if we read the middle section of this very chapter from Mark's gospel, we see exactly how poor of a shepherd Herod was, and why the people of Israel were indeed like sheep without a shepherd. Herod throws a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leaders of Galilee, at which he kills John the Baptist, the herald announcing the coming of God's kingdom. Meanwhile, the people of Israel are longing for the true shepherd who will bring them into that very kingdom. The people of God have become precisely what Moses and Ezekiel warned against, sheep without a shepherd, weakened and scattered and vulnerable.

We see the opposite from Jesus. Instead of feasts for the social elite, Jesus feeds the hungry crowds with a miraculous meal of five loaves and two fish. This feeding of the 5000, also here in this chapter of Mark, was a reminder of how Moses provided food for the people of Israel in the wilderness. Jesus is shown as a good shepherd, one who, like Moses, protected the people and provided for them. He is shown to be the true shepherd, the one promised by God, the one who brings the kingdom of God into the lives of the sheep.

In Ezekiel's warning against Israel's kings who enriched themselves and the expense of the people, he says,

You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. (Ezekiel 34:4-5, NRSV)

Then God promises to restore his flock as their true shepherd. God will "rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered." God will seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak. Jesus does all this. 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 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's Gospel account is clearly identifying Jesus as the divine shepherd, the one who will gather his sheep from the places where they have been scattered. And here in chapter six, Jesus feels great compassion for these sheep without a shepherd and begins to teach them many things.

Jesus certainly heals the sick and lifts up the downtrodden, but here the emphasis is on teaching. The true food that this flock needs is the very Word of God. This is what Jeremiah prophesied: shepherds after God's own heart who will feed you with knowledge and understanding. Having our material needs met is good, but what we need to properly live is the Word of God. Without that, we are truly lost. Teaching the faith, proclaiming the kingdom of heaven, and speaking the good news of the gospel are what matters most.

As sheep in God's flock, this is what we should be ready to receive. Especially when facing challenging times in life. Having our physical needs met is helpful, especially when not able to properly do it ourselves. But we also need the peace that is beyond human understanding. And the only way to get that is from Jesus himself. Everything could be perfectly fine in our life and in the world around us, but if we don't have the peace that comes from Jesus, then ultimately, we have nothing.

This is why Jesus' compassion led him to teach. We always need God's Word in our life. We always need his truth, his wisdom, his righteous judgement, and his gospel of peace. It doesn't matter if it's the best day of our life or the worst day of our life, we still need our good shepherd. We need the one who will protect us and provide for us. We need the one who is willing to lay down his life for his sheep. That is what a good shepherd does. He gathers the sheep in, provides for their every need, protects them from harm, and is prepared to lay down his life to do so.

Our good shepherd Jesus has done this. We are not sheep without a shepherd, left to wander aimlessly. We are loved, we are cared for, we are protected, and our good shepherd has given his life that we might live for all eternity. May this good news grant you peace today and always. And may you look to your good shepherd for your every need. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.