

DOMINUS PASCIT ME

A Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday of the Year (B)

Jere. 23: 1-6; Ps. 22(23); Eph. 2: 13-18; 6: 30-34

“The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.” My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, the words of the psalm we have been singing are familiar. Most Christians know it - Psalm 22(23) - by heart. It is perhaps the best known psalm in the Christian world. The psalmist of old sings of the loving kindness of God who is the guardian, the provider and the protector of his chosen people. He praises the faithful Shepherd of Israel who is rich in mercy - who loves his people in spite of their infidelity to the covenant. But his song of faith and praise is only fulfilled when the Son of God took flesh and lived among us and led us as a true shepherd after the heart of his Father and offered himself as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Through the Prophet Jeremiah, the Lord laments over the failures of the leaders of Israel. He promises to send a true shepherd and through him, to raise faithful shepherds to lead his people and pasture them - free from fear of their enemies. The true shepherd of (the New) Israel, as I have said, is the Lord Jesus. He is *The Lord-our-integrity*. In him we see the actualization of the promises of God in the Law, the prophets and the psalms.

This is clear in the Gospel Reading we have just heard. The Lord and his apostles had been so busy attending to the needs of the people. The apostles had just come back from their missionary journey and given him report. And now they needed some rest. But just when they went to where they thought was a lonely place to get the deserved rest, they met a large crowd. The Lord did not tell these people to go away so that he and his apostles could rest. Instead, he demonstrated that he is the Promised Shepherd. He took pity on them and set himself to teach them at some length.

When we hear about people who are like sheep without a shepherd, our minds go to people in war-torn countries, who are forced to live in misery. Our thoughts go to children who spend their childhood, not clean playgrounds and schools, but in one refugee camp after another. We recall the gory images we see on the television of people who are victims of diseases and famine, of huge populations harassed and brutalized by the military, whose lives are cut short by the weapons of war. These are people whose natural homelands have been turned into theatres of horror because of these senseless wars.

These people, like the people we read about in the Gospel, are truly like sheep without a shepherd. And they need the Prince of Peace, the Good Shepherd, who, in the words of the Apostle, broke down the walls of hatred between peoples.

While we justly think about these suffering fellow human beings, we are tempted to forget about the people who suffer near us. Examples of people, especially old people who suffer, not from lack of food and drink but from lack human love, from lack of family and friends. Again and again we read about someone who has been dead in his/her apartment for months without anyone knowing about it, or about someone, who in sheer desperation, has taken his/her life. These lonely people need Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

We hear endless proposals for debates on whether or not God exists, by atheists and humanists. These people who claim not to believe in God and not to need God are in deed like sheep without a shepherd. And they certainly need the Good Shepherd, the One Teacher.

From time to time, we find ourselves in very difficult situations, such as ill health, threat to job or loss of job or death of a dear one. At these times, we feel like people who are groping in a dark slippery tunnel, or as the psalmist says, *the valley of darkness*. May be there are some of us here present who are really *walking in the valley of darkness*, who are going through terrible experiences in their lives. Here is the Good news: the Lord Jesus Christ, true God and true man, is our Shepherd and he is ever present. Even in the darkest times of our lives, he, *the light that enlightens all men*, is with us. The psalmist in another place sings about the Lord who is ever-present and most powerful:

*God is our refuge and our strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we shall not fear,
though the earth should change
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult*

We should not fear any evil because the Lord who is Almighty is with us: *the God of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our stronghold (Cf. Psalm 46: 1; 11). The Lord is our shepherd; there is nothing we shall want.*

At times we fear the threat of those who hate us, especially when these people are powerful and wicked. These people cannot compete with the Lord, our shepherd and strength. The psalmist is right: the Lord has prepared a banquet for us in the sight of these foes. The true foes are no other than those the Apostle identifies, when he teaches us, *“For it is not against human enemies that we have to struggle, but against principalities and the ruling forces and the masters of the darkness in this world, the spirits of evil in heavens”* (Eph. 6:12). We know that no matter the number of these foes and the power that they possess, we are more than conquerors in the Lord our Shepherd – in the one who has given us the strength (Cf. Rom. 8:37). We are God’s folk – God’s children and he who lives in us is infinitely greater than all the powers arraigned against us (Cf. 1 John 4:4). Therefore we can fear no evil for since the Lord, the Good Shepherd is with us, who can be against us (Cf. Rom. 8:31).

*If I should walk in the valley of darkness no evil would I fear.
You are there with your with your crook and your staff;
with these you give me comfort.*

*Fr Damian O. Eze, MSP
St Paul’s Parish, Gävle
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