

Homily for 16th Sunday, Year B – July 18.

This is not the Fourth Sunday of Easter – it is not Good Shepherd Sunday. But the theme of “Shepherd” in Scripture cannot be exhausted one weekend-a-year. This weekend, God as our Shepherd is emphasized in our First Reading, Psalm, and Gospel.

If we were to read beyond today’s gospel passage, Jesus’ observing that the people are like sheep without a shepherd is the motivation for the Feeding of the Five-Thousand, also referred to as the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes. But we will not hear Saint Mark’s rendition of that great event. Starting next week, for five weeks we will read from the Sixth Chapter of the Gospel According to Saint John. There we will read of Our Lord Feeding the Five Thousand and then unfolding its meaning as He explains that He is the True Bread from Heaven.

Christ is moved with pity for the people, who are like sheep without a shepherd. And, first by teaching them, He begins to shepherd them.

==_==_==_==_

We all have images of what it means for someone to shepherd sheep. Many of the pictures in our minds have been formed through our Christian understanding of Christ. Some of them have to do with the stories we have heard about the difficulties involved in herding domesticated or semi-domesticated animals.

Sheep can be stubborn, biting, kicking animals. They can be ornery one minute, and then frozen stiff in fear the next. They can run off in all directions.

In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, our ancestors in faith understood sheep to be good representatives of themselves in their relationship with God. They strained against His guidance, they wandered from His safety. They turned to worship other gods. They hurt each other. And God continued to guide them, find them, help them, forgive them, provide for them. He was true to them even when they were not true to Him.

==_==_==_==_

The relationship of Sheep to shepherd can seem demeaning to some people. Sheep are not fellow human beings to those who shepherd them.

But then, as people look to the world they live in, they understand that they are small and unequal to many things; for example, the weather and earthquakes and other forces of nature. They are constantly learning just how large the universe is. They are but specks on a planet that is a speck in the solar system that is a speck in the galaxy – and so on.

Yet God made this world out of love for them, and loves each of them.

In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, our ancestors in faith understood shepherding to be a good example of how close and intimate God is to us. As profound is the Creator of the world, He spoke to them, He guided them, He formed them as a people and as His beloved. He made them His flock.

Christ came out of love for us. He still comes to us.

The people came to Jesus. Based on what has gone on so far in His ministry – they came spurred on by many things.

1 - Jesus had been healing and teaching – people still needed that.

2 - Or they were curious about Him from what others had said.

3 - No doubt the Apostles, who had just returned from expelling demons, healing the sick, and preaching repentance, had caused others to seek out Jesus.

Jesus acted the Shepherd. Today, we hear that he had compassion for them, and taught them. Next week we hear of His shepherding care by feeding them – answering their immediate bodily needs.

==_==_==_==

In Psalm Twenty-three – which is one of the most popular psalms – The Lord is presented as a great shepherd of sheep and host of a banquet.

One prayer associated with Psalm Twenty-Three sees in its verses an Old Testament hint pointing toward the Christian Sacraments of Initiation. For the Lord, who is presented as

1 - guiding us to waters and

2 - feeding us safely at a banquet and

3 - anointing our heads with oil,

is the one who

1 - cleanses us in the waters of Baptism and

- 2 - Anoints us in Confirmation and**
- 3 - Feeds us in the Eucharist.**

==_==_==_==

Elsewhere in John's gospel, Our Lord says He has one flock. He desires everyone to be in that one Flock. And toward the end of the gospel, He specifically commissioned Peter to care for that Flock. The successors of Peter still understand that is their first job. May we all - not just in words, but also visibly for the world to see – heal the divisions of Christ's one flock that has been divided for centuries.

==_==_==_==

Brothers and Sisters, we are gathered here precisely because we know that even today we need Jesus' shepherding; His care, His teaching, and His nourishment. And to circle back around – let us especially this week and for the following five weeks – ponder the gift of Himself which He gives us as the Bread of Life, given from the Good Shepherd.