

Seventh Sunday after Trinity, Proper 11, Year B, 2021

Psalm 23, Mark 6.30-34, 53-end

The opening of this Sunday's Gospel draws a somewhat unfamiliar picture that we shall spend time exploring. We see the apostles, the twelve whom Jesus sent out gathering around him and telling him what they did and what they taught. Even that sequence - what they did and what they taught - is of interest, as we see a little later. The disciples heal, but they also teach. Jesus heals, but he also teaches. Healing and teaching are related to one another in Jesus' ministry and in ministries associated with his ministry then and in every age. They may be separate actions, but they belong together. Think about how right teaching brings healing; this can range from keeping a wholesome diet to knowing your future is secure in God. Thinking of last weekend's sermon healing and teaching not only complement each other; they actually balance each other. Healing is not only physical as in the laying on of hands or the touching of Jesus' garment, but healing also takes place by learning from Jesus and learning with his people. What I appreciate about the people trying to touch the fringe of Jesus' cloak - to which Mike alluded in his sermon a few weeks back - is that the people knew where to turn. They turned to Jesus. Are we turned to Jesus? Do we need to turn to Jesus? Think of the first two verses of Psalm 121. "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth." The psalmist knows where to look. Likewise the crowds in today's Gospel know where to turn.

Let's stay with the image drawn by the Evangelist of the apostles gathering around Jesus and telling him what they did and taught after he sent them out. Do you remember the framing of the commission as Mark relates it? Let me remind you.

"Jesus called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, 'Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.' So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them." Mark 6:7-13

Imagine yourself if you can gathering around Jesus with others today, who follow and serve. What would you tell Jesus about what you did and taught in his name? What shape might this telling look like I wonder. Let's stop there for just a moment. I will give you a minute to start thinking about what you might say about what you did and what you taught in Jesus' name concerning say the gift of life, your stewardship of your resources and of creation and above the abundance of God's saving grace.

In my case I might tell him about a man who came to see me during the week, who said before departing almost as an afterthought how surprised he was by just how effective prayer is. I might tell him of the clergy plus group's 24 hours at the Benedictine monastery of Göttweig, where we met to learn a little together about Orthodoxy as in Eastern Orthodoxy. I might tell him about our wedding anniversary and my birthday both in the same week. The sermon I preached at the Wednesday 930am service of Holy Communion. The guided tour a few of us took of Jewish life in Vienna today. The office work that has fallen to me. How our evening prayer services have migrated from the church building to our Zoom platform with a steady attendance of about seven persons. My concerns that we may have lost people during and because of the pandemic, but not only. I might tell him of the principles a few of us are working on as guidelines for holding good and helpful discussions in council. Visits to the shop. Visitors to the office. Conversations on the telephone. Short walks in the Belvedere. For kindnesses received. And then I might tell him of all the things that aren't being accomplished and happening. I might tell him of how tired I can feel. That there doesn't seem enough time to read or meet the many demands of life. Of looking forward to summer leave. The blessings of children and grandchildren. Of wondering what will happen when my mother of 101-plus passes away. That is a sketch of what I might say. How honest will I be? Will I see things whole? What will I filter out? What will I keep for myself? What is relevant to the commission as it relates to me and my context?

Above I invited you briefly to do something similar to what I just shared with you. It is obvious I had time to think about what I might say having a hopeful eye to what Jesus says to the apostles, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." Jesus' response is a very affirming and encouraging one. Can we labourers receive it? "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." Not so difficult, because it is my nature to long for such places.

Jesus ministers to those whom he has sent out and not only to the crowds. It is time he tells them to take a much needed rest, but as we read on this is not what happens. The crowds just keep coming. Jesus and the apostles try to get away, but everywhere they go they are followed or recognised. They take a boat and people rush to the other side to meet them there. It is at that very moment we are told, "As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion for them." Why? Mark tells us, "Because the great crowd was like sheep without a shepherd: and he began to teach them many things."

Aha! Yet another reference to teaching. But what struck me is just how much this picture of God's people in particular and people in general in need of a shepherd rings true today though many will be loath to admit it. My own pilgrimage with God has often been a reluctant one thinking I know better... or some such attitude. Can we cross our hearts and say with the Psalmist, "The Lord is my shepherd?" And can we believe having made that confession that we will lack nothing? The first I can say without blinking an eye, the second part I need to learn anew daily.

Jesus is moved by compassion for the crowd and it is for this reason that Jesus begins to teach the crowd. In today's church and in today's world we can't but notice that it is often the world and it is often the church that wants to teach Jesus. We have turned the tables around. Once again I am taken by Jesus' diagnosis, his observation of the people who are coming to them that they are like sheep without a shepherd. How true is that for us?

The people are without God. For to be prone to or indulge in a wrong understanding of God or to have a false picture of God is to be without God... It is to have missed the mark. Teaching and right teaching, understanding and right understanding are essential. Jesus response to his observation that the people are lacking a shepherd is to teach! I am reminded of the Chinese proverb, "Give a person a fish and you feed them for a day. Teach a person to fish and you feed them for a lifetime."

Because the people are as without a shepherd with God Jesus teaches them many things. He does so out of compassion. To have compassion for someone can also be described in English in the idiom as one's heart going out to. The Greek word being

used here occurs four times in Mark's Gospel. The first time early on in Jesus' public ministry as a leper comes to Jesus asking to be made clean. Mark writes, "Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out his hand and healed him." (Mark 1.41) The second time is in today's passage. The third time is when a group of people some four thousand in number have been with Jesus for three days without anything to eat, which has him say, "I have compassion for the crowd if I send them home now ... they will faint on the way" (Mark 8.2) And the fourth and final time is when a father asks Jesus to have compassion on his son who is wracked by a spirit possibly epilepsy. Jesus does have compassion, while rebuking the people for their unbelief. (Mark 9.17-29). The episode ends with the disciples asking why they could not cast out the spirit and Jesus replying, "This kind can come out only by prayer". I am reminded of the man who visited me during the week saying how surprised he was by how effective prayer is.

Jesus's is a healing ministry, but Jesus's is also a teaching ministry. What is the posture of the learner. It is to be openminded. It is to listen attentively. It is to ask questions – not to trick, but to better understand.

So let's recap. We asked ourselves a question. A question that I would love you to make part of your reflections this week. Take the order of service home with you and return to this Sunday's Gospel a few times. Not once but time and time again. What would you tell Jesus about what you have done and taught. Jesus has made a diagnosis – people resembling sheep without a shepherd – which elicits a compassionate response. Is it only the world that is shepherdless? The Church itself seems at times to be without a compass. Is Jesus really our shepherd, and can we learn to really put our trust in him? Peter had the answer to that. "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life." I am sure as it is humanly possible to be that with Jesus I will walk through valley of the shadow of death and fear no evil. Jesus my comforter and my guide. God's name be praised.