

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost 22th July 2012

Jer 23: 1-8; Ps 23; Eph 2: 11-22; Mark 6: 30-34, 53-56

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'They were like sheep without a shepherd'. That's the image which runs through the readings for today.

Now sheep are good enough animals in their way. A sheep is an excellent machine for manufacturing wool, and mutton and milk (if you like sheep's milk). But they're not the most intelligent animals, and perhaps that's why we find I hard to admire or respect them. When my daughter was seven or eight she had a teacher who she reckoned looked like a sheep – and it's true, there was something about the hairstyle – anyway she could never quite take her seriously.

The prophet Jeremiah uses this image for Israel, scattered into foreign lands in the time of the Exile. They are scattered because the shepherds, the kings, have done what pleased *them*, and not cared for their flock, the nation. He is speaking God's word of judgement on those false shepherds, and a word of promise for the people, the promise that there *will* be a true king, a king like David, who will gather the flock once again and care for them.

We recall that according to the story David was a shepherd in his youth [1 Sam 16], and used to fight off lions and bears with his sling when they threatened his flock. We have just said together the best loved of the psalms of David, in which God is likened to a shepherd leading us by streams of water.

We may also recall that Moses (though he grew up in a palace in Egypt) spent some difficult years as a shepherd in the mountains, looking after his father-in-law's flock, and it was there that he encountered God in a burning bush. Maybe a spell at shepherding is a better training for leadership than what many princes get, lounging about in palaces eating off the fat of the land?

The actual phrase 'like sheep without a shepherd', which we meet in the Gospel, is a quotation from Numbers 27: 17, where Moses, the shepherd of Israel, is being urged at the end of his life to appoint a successor, someone to take over from him, so that after his death the people may not be leaderless (quote, 'like sheep without a shepherd'). The person he appoints as his successor of course is Joshua. If, as a Jew or an early Christian, you were reading that passage in Greek you would notice that when the name Joshua is turned into Greek it becomes 'Yesous', Jesus.

Keep all that in mind as we approach the Gospel passage: sheep without a shepherd, and the promise of a shepherd who will be a true David-like ruler, and whose name will be Jesus.

'The apostles gathered around Jesus' – like sheep clustering around a shepherd. They have been on mission and have been amazed to experience the power of God at work in their words and the works of their healing hands. There is much to reflect on. And along with that we have just heard the story of the death of John the Baptist, like a warning of what the powers of this world will do to those that threaten them with the truth of God. Again, much to reflect on. So Jesus tries to lead the disciples away to a deserted place to rest – to lie down in green pastures for the refreshing of the soul.

But there is no refreshment to be had. There's all this *pressure*: people coming and going in their neediness, leaving no time even to eat. And when they get into a boat and sail round the coast somehow they are spotted, or more important 'they recognized him' so that when they get to their chosen deserted place it's been filled with a crowd, hurrying ahead of them, waiting, waiting. And, we're told, 'he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd'.

He fed them with words and he also fed them with bread: here should come the story of the feeding of the five thousand, but we'll hear that story next week. Instead, jumping ahead, we have another journey, another crowd who 'recognized him' and rushed about bringing the sick on mats, begging to be touched. It's all so *frenetic*.

But at the centre is the one they are rushing to meet, like moths to a light, like sheep to a shepherd. 'They recognized him' – not presumably because they have seen his face, but somehow they knew this was the one they needed, the Joshua sent by God, the new king David, the shepherd of Israel, the one of whom people say *Who then is this?*

And where are we in this story? How sheep-like are you? Sheep, as I said, are excellent animals in their way, if you like woolly jumpers, but not very bright. Humans have many sheep-like qualities. Left to themselves, on the mountains of Israel, or New South Wales, they will wander and get lost, as humans too often wander in life without aim or direction.

Also, unlike some animals, sheep will eat whatever comes across their wandering path and it may not be good for them. There's a scene in one of Thomas Hardy's novels where a flock of sheep have got into a patch of some noxious weed which fills them with gas. They are all lying helpless puffed up like balloons until Gabriel Oak comes to puncture their lungs and deflate them. When you look at the poisons which people pour into their system, drink and drugs and violent images on video, it's no wonder our community seems sometimes sick at heart – and then we queue up for more of the same….

And sheep, thirdly, need a leader because they can't lead themselves. Wolves form a pack, and identify a leader; bees do everything for their queen, but sheep just wander about, until a shepherd comes to guide them in right pathways.

In our society we like to think that everyone is his or her own master, and we don't need leaders (how we sneer at politicians) but that is exactly what sheep

do; and history shows that a leaderless people will in the end run after anyone, especially a person of power like a Lenin or Mao or Idi Amin, someone whose charisma catches our imagination and we shall all trot off after him or her, sheepishly docile, no matter what precipices we may be led towards.

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It is compassion for humanity wandering on the face of the earth like lost sheep that inspires St Paul, or the person who in his name wrote the letter to the Christians in Ephesus. His audience are converted pagans, what Jews called 'Gentiles', 'the nations'. Last week we heard him proclaim the blessings they have received from God, and now in chapter 2 he is reminding them of what they owe to God, who has rescued them from their lost condition and brought them into the fold.

In verse 12 he reminds the readers of the privileges of Israel, the people of God, from which they were excluded. He lists five.

Firstly, Israel had *Christ*, the promise of a Messiah, but they as Greeks and pagans, knew nothing of that. Secondly, Israel was a *commonwealth*, a community founded by God and under God's guidance, but they were aliens. Thirdly, Israel had *covenants* which God had made with his people through history, which gave them promises of better things to come – but they were strangers, without any part in those covenants. Fourthly, Israel therefore had a *hope* of a glorious future in this life or the next, but they were without such a hope. And fifthly, Israel derived its being from *God* but they were 'without God in the world'.

What makes a fulfilled human being? Is it power, success, intelligence, a speedboat in the harbour? As a Jew, but even more as a Christian, this writer sees there are two kinds of human being: there are those who know God, the source of their life, and those who do not.

We are made to live in relationship with the God of our life, and to form communities in which we live together under God's guidance. To live that way is life and peace; but for those who live only for themselves, or who attach themselves to gods that are not God, their condition is sad: 'aliens, strangers, having no hope and without God in the world'.

He says this, as I hear it, not in judgement, but in compassion for the things that get between us, as humans so easily led astray, and what we really need, the divine source of our delight. He says it also in celebration of the blessing which his readers have accepted.

We might want to point to ways in which many religions and philosophies can be paths which lead people towards the truth of God (and the New Testament has space for that) but the goal that he is calling us to celebrate is not one religion or another (*even* the religion of the Bible) but the personal presence of God in Christ.

He says that in the past there were Jews (who had it right, more or less) and there were Gentiles (who mostly didn't), there were insiders and outsiders, *but now* (verse 13, a great Pauline phrase) *but now* Christ has remade the world. The wall which divides Jew from Gentile, and humanity from God, has been broken down and Christ has made peace between them. There is now one humanity in Christ.

What has happened? In some way it is the cross which has destroyed division, made peace, brought unity, welded two into one. He struggles to say *how* this is so (and don't we all) – but I think of it like this. The Bible tells of God giving those privileges to Israel, the chosen people. The trouble with privileges is that we want to hang on to them, keep them to ourselves. Give a child a gift and they may not like it much but just see what happens if another child tries to take it off them. Israel did that; all religions do that; Christianity (to our shame) does that more than most.

But *Christ* is the one who lets go of everything he has into the arms of God for the life of the world. Christ is the one sent by God to give himself up to God in love for our sake, and the cross is the sign and enactment of that great truth. It is the event which makes us one with the Holy One we call God; it is the invitation to be one with God 'in Christ' as we live by that cross-shaped way.

The cross is the challenge to say *Yes* to Christ. As we say *Yes* to Christ we may need to say *Maybe* to Christianity, or at least those bits of Christianity which tempt us to prefer Christianity to Christ himself. Think how hard we hold on to some favourite doctrine, or favourite way of praying, or favourite Bible translation or favourite denomination – hold on to them like a privilege or possession which is ours and we are not going to let go of them.

That's why this author, like St Paul his master, keeps coming back to the cross, not as a tragic accident or a gruesome execution but as a *sign of love* in which we see who God is (the God who gives himself, herself utterly for us) and we see who we might be, if we can find life not in holding on to it but in giving it away.

And that's why, as we heard last week, he keeps urging us to locate ourselves 'in Christ', because Christ is the one perfect example of the 'new humanity' which is fulfilled in and through the self-giving of the cross. It is 'in Christ' that we become fully human, and 'in Christ' that we collectively become a 'house of God', a community willing to be broken down and remade again and again, until we are alive with God's Spirit, reshaped into the image of Christ.

Who then is this? It's all about recognition. Do we recognize Christ as the one who shows us that left to ourselves we are 'like sheep without a shepherd'?

Do we recognize Christ as the one who (whoever we are, wherever we come from, however we get there) holds for us the secret of true human being and presents it to us on the cross of love?

Do we recognize Christ, as we meet him in the eucharist and in living, as the one through whom, with whom, in whom there is life abounding?