

Sunday July 18, 2021

16th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Parishioner Reflection

By: Jim McDonald

The Collect today gives us a wonderful prayer for God's graces to be poured out on the shepherds of the Church first and foremost, but also on all secular governments. This is something for which we must continually and fervently pray every day.

The first reading from Jeremiah shows us what happens when our shepherds, whether inside or outside the Church, are not guided by faith, hope and charity (love). The result is division and strife, different factions seeking their own interests; in a word, disunity. Christ calls us to love one another and to share willingly and cheerfully, out of compassion and love for those who are in need, from the riches with which we have been blessed. There is no better way to break down barriers between people and to encourage dialogue, understanding and respect.

The Holy Spirit unites us as we see in the second reading from Ephesians, and fills us with the peace of Christ, a peace that the world cannot give. Christ shed his Blood on the Cross that we might receive the Holy Spirit and become a new creation. The message of the Gospel was for the Gentiles as well as the Jews, freely and lovingly given, thus uniting all people in the love of God and of Jesus Christ his Son. "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must lead them, too, and they shall hear my voice. There shall be one flock then, one shepherd." (John 10:16)

Imagine being a Gentile in the first century A.D. in the Mediterranean world, having no knowledge even of God's existence, having to survive day to day with no hope of salvation, or indeed without any knowledge of what that would mean. This describes the plight of many in our present day. But the Holy Spirit went ahead of the disciples to prepare the hearts of those who would come to hear the Good News and believe. What great Mercy! We do not know what work the Holy Spirit is about and, if we are faithful in our witness, who knows who may be inspired to turn to God (or when) and believe in His Son Jesus Christ. This is worth pondering when we pray for our families! "I tell you, there will likewise be more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to repent." (Luke 15:7) The Apostles did not know to whom the Holy Spirit would lead them or who would accept or reject their message. It was important that they deliver it (see the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13:18 and following).

Psalm 23 (if you haven't done so already, I encourage you to commit it to memory!) tells us who is to be our Shepherd. By putting our faith and trust in the Lord, the trials and tribulations of our lives and of our present culture will not disturb us. We will have the peace that only the Lord can give. Prayerfully reading this Psalm brings a great sense of peace and consolation in the Lord's providence.

The Gospel reading in Mark chapter 6: 30-34 follows the account of the death of John the Baptist which begins in verse 14. This is placed right after Jesus sends the Apostles on a Mission, alluding to the first reading. While they are healing the sick and preaching the need for repentance and to turn back to God, we see quite the opposite in the behaviour of Herod and Herodias, culminating in the execution of John the Baptist as a way of silencing God's call to repentance. This was done out of fear of how their lives would have to change if they admitted their wrong-doing; the loss of status, the respect of their peers and of the Roman authorities.

When the Apostles return from their Mission, having had great success in bringing the Gentiles whom they encountered to knowledge of and faith in God, Jesus wants to take them to a quiet place for rest and to reflect on what they have accomplished in the power of the Holy Spirit. In seeing the crowds that have followed them, Jesus has compassion on them and becomes himself a shepherd to them, teaching about the Kingdom of God.

There is an overriding message of peace and consolation in the Love of God in these readings as revealed by His Son Jesus Christ. By listening to the Word of God, believing in his son Jesus Christ and repenting of their sins, countless people down through the centuries have received the grace of God in the Holy Spirit and the love of Christ. And this grace is offered even to all those yet to come. It is a gift freely given but paid for at great price.

I am reminded of the fifth decade of the Joyful Mysteries of the Holy Rosary, the finding of the Lord in the Temple after three days of searching. There are times when, like the Gentiles before the Mission of the Apostles, we feel anxious about many things and that there is no hope in a world that seems to be in chaos. But if we have faith and trust that the Holy Spirit is at work and we truly seek God, we will find him or rather He will find us (indeed he never left us!). And where do we find him in a very real and present way but in the Holy Mass and the Sacraments. And he has given us the Holy Spirit, making the people of God his Holy Temple!