

De Krijtberg, July 18, 2021, 16th Sunday of the year. Jer. 23:1-6, Mk. 6:30-34.  
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## **LIKE SHEEP WITHOUT A SHEPHERD**

Jesus had sent out his disciples to preach the gospel. When they came back, he said to them: *Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.* These words seem eminently appropriate during the holiday season. Many people go out to a quiet place, to get away from the hustle and bustle and to recover. But this reading is about something else. The most important sentence is the closing sentence: *When Jesus saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd.* Also the first reading, from Jeremiah, is about sheep, and about shepherds, good and bad shepherds.

### **Good and bad shepherds**

In Biblical times, a shepherd was needed to lead the sheep to the places where food and water could be found. A herd without a shepherd was nowhere, had nothing to eat or drink, and was at the mercy of the wild beasts. Psalm 23 - this Sunday's psalm - evokes the image of the shepherd who cares for his flock: he makes his sheep rest in green pastures and leads them to peaceful waters. It is therefore not surprising that in the ancient East the shepherd has become an image of the king, who ensures that his people can live in peace and prosperity. In the Bible, the shepherd has even become a metaphor for God. The psalm just mentioned speaks of God as a shepherd.

The prophets also use the image of the bad shepherd. Ezekiel is talking about shepherds feeding themselves and not the sheep (34:8). Jeremiah distinguishes in the first reading between shepherds who tend the sheep and shepherds who lead them astray. Those good and those bad shepherds are good and bad kings. The good king judges the cause of the poor and needy (Jer. 22:16), he delivers from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. He does no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow (22:3). But there are also evil kings, who have eyes and heart only for their dishonest gain, who shed innocent blood and practice oppression and violence (22:17). Jeremiah can do nothing but denounce the evil kings. He further encourages his hearers by telling them that God will not forsake his people, He will provide a good shepherd: *the days are coming... when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land* (23:5). With this assurance, the first reading ends.

### **Jesus as a good shepherd**

In the gospel old promises are carried out. Jesus is presented here as the good shepherd promised by Jeremiah. We heard how Jesus felt compassion for the crowds because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Sheep without a shepherd is a Biblical expression for a rudderless and helpless people. The compassion spoken of in the Gospel is not to be understood as an expression of human feeling or human emotion. Jesus here expresses God's concern for the helpless man. And people instinctively feel that Jesus is a good shepherd, that he does not seek to dominate them, but to make them happy.

### ***My brother's keeper***

Biblical pastoral terminology has become part of church language. Jesus is the good shepherd. The flock is led by the Pope as chief shepherd, by the bishops with their crosier - a sign of their pastoral task -, by pastors and pastoral workers. In addition, you have the 'ordinary' believers. You may wonder to what extent these terms still appeal to contemporary believers. Most of them no longer see themselves as a flock of docile sheep. Many people can cope with Jesus as an inspiring figure, but not with the church as an organization that distills from Jesus' words all kinds of rules and makes sure that these rules are followed. It seems that many (young) people are quite religiously interested, but that they choose themselves and put together their own religious package. Still, I think the image of the shepherd is still usable. It is useful when we also apply it to ourselves. We are all shepherds. Shepherds of one another. The answer to Cain's question, *am I my brother's keeper?* (Gen. 4:9) reads: yes. We are all each other's keeper, we are shepherds to one another, in the footsteps of the good shepherd Jesus.

### ***he began to teach them many things***

The Gospel ends with a sentence indicating the nature of Jesus' pastoral ministry: *his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.* It is striking that it does not say: he led or directed them, but: he taught them. Jesus' ministry appears to consist of teaching. He was a teacher rather than a leader. A good teacher listens to the student, talks to him and inspires him. Such a teacher must have been Jesus. Pastoral care mainly consists of encouraging, inspiring, listening and helping people to find their own way through life. This is a task that Jesus passed on to the apostles, not only to them, but to all of us. While listening and inspiring each other we can be shepherds to each other, we can be 'our brother's keeper'.