

Fr. Thomas Esposito, O.Cist.
16th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year B
Cistercian Abbey - July 22, 2012
Readings: Jeremiah 23:1-6; Eph 2:13-18; Mk 6:30-34

Dear friends in Christ,

There are several odd aspects about today's Gospel. First among these is the fact that Jesus utters only one sentence; he tells his disciples, "Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest awhile." In a normal Gospel reading, we would hear either a part or all of a discourse of Jesus; today, however, the narrator does most of the talking. But what does the narrator describe here? Perhaps influenced by blockbuster action-hero movies, we always expect a miracle from Jesus, as if he were the Caped Crusader of Capernaum or Captain Galilee, healing warped souls and bodies, and fighting injustice with supernatural strength and sheer grace. We find nothing of the sort today. In fact, nothing really *happens* in this Gospel passage; the most thrilling part is a boat ride across a lake! Encouraging your entourage to go on a retreat is hardly a rousing form of Gospel entertainment.

Such a Gospel, however, provides us with a precious glimpse of the humanity of Jesus. That the Son of God was a human being like you and me is too often overlooked, and it is usually more worthy of meditation than a miracle story. The last line of today's Gospel is utterly fascinating, if we are willing to ponder it for a moment- or for a lifetime: "When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things." Jesus is obviously taking charge of the wayward sheep gathered to hear him, exactly as Jeremiah foretold in the first reading. We still gather together as one flock to hear his message today. But we frown at the idea of being called sheep, of being compared to those mindless and dull animals who need a guide to tell them where to eat and when to frolic.

No greater privilege exists, however, than to be a member of Jesus' flock, because our Shepherd pastures us in ways which remind us of our infinite dignity as sons and daughters of God. As the Gospel indicates, he *teaches* us, by means of his Word and example, how to love God with our whole heart and soul and mind and strength, and how to see God by seeing Christ in our neighbor. He also *feeds* us, but this feeding is not mentioned in today's Gospel. At this point, I have to say that today's Gospel is incomplete; we're missing the rest of the story which

should follow. Cutting up the Gospel for readings at Mass is sometimes tricky business, and the good lectionary folks made a tiny mistake today. As a result, I'm giving you all a little homework, even though we're in the middle of summer: I want you to go home and read the passage which immediately follows today's Gospel. We can't fully appreciate our Gospel- or our Shepherd- until we bring the two passages together.

I'll give you a helping hand on your assignment. After teaching the crowds for hours in the deserted place, the disciples remind Jesus that he should dismiss the weary people, so that they can buy food for themselves. This is just a ploy, though; as we just heard, *the disciples themselves* were hungry, since the crowds didn't allow them to eat! How does our Shepherd respond? With five loaves and two measly fish scrounged up by the disciples, Jesus feeds 5,000 people. We know the story very well; this miracle is featured in each of the Gospels, and we'll actually hear John's version of it next Sunday. But it's always good to refresh our memory of what Jesus does here: "...Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to [his] disciples to set before the people."

That language should sound familiar to you. In a few minutes, I will go to the altar, say the blessing, break the bread, and give it to you. Our faith is the continuity of centuries mixed with eternity. In other words, Jesus continues to shepherd his flock, his hungry little sheep, even today. We should never imagine that the crowds who actually saw and touched Jesus are far removed us, ancient witnesses from the past without any relation to us today. No- when the letter to the Ephesians speaks of those far away joining those nearby in becoming one in Christ, we must think of ourselves uniting with those blessed crowds, our hearts burning as he teaches us, our hunger satisfied by the bread he gives us to eat.

Dear friends, we are the crowd running to Jesus every time we gather for the Eucharist; we are the ones he teaches when we listen to the Word of the Lord; we are among the 5,000 people *here today* whom the divine shepherd nourishes with sanctified wheat. Like the crowds along the shore of the Galilean lake, you have come to the place where you know your Shepherd tends his wayward flock. You are eager to report all that is weighing on your heart, all that you have done and said and thought. Mass is a most beautiful "deserted place;" Jesus invites you here every Sunday, even daily, to rest a while with Him. There is peace here, because Christ our peace is present here. It is a most refreshing peace which the world cannot give, and which we cannot find in a hectic world running itself empty. Jesus himself is waiting to feed you Himself,

in the humble form of our daily bread. May we never grow weary of thanking our Shepherd for this most awesome of miracles.

PETITIONS

We bring our needs and concerns to our heavenly Lord, who continues to feed us and the world with His goodness.

1. For our holy father Pope Benedict and all those who minister in the name of Christ, that they may be fearless and joyful witnesses of Christ's love...
2. For the victims of the horrific shooting in Colorado and their loved ones, that the senseless evil perpetrated there may not extinguish, in their hearts and in ours, the unshakeable faith in the Love which triumphs over hate...
3. For all mothers and their unborn children, that they may be given the help and courage they need to choose life...
4. For an increase in vocations to the priesthood and religious life, that young men and women may nourish the seed which God has planted in them...
5. For those who do not know the love of Christ, or those who mock what they do not know, that we may provide a joyful witness of that love and be instruments of God's grace for them...
6. For your own intentions, in silence...

Loving God, nothing can come to us except what you will. Please grant these petitions as they be good for us, and strengthen us to accept your will, through Christ our Lord.