

Annoying Sheep!

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Psalm 23; Ephesians 2:11-end; Mark 6:30-34,53-end

And he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.
[Mark 6³⁴]

What do you get if you cross an angry sheep and a moody cow? An animal that's in a 'Baaaaad Mooooood!'

Three of our readings today talk about shepherds:

- ✦ Jeremiah picks up the theme of the shepherd as a leader.

King Zedekiah had been a weak leader - a bad shepherd - and was too easily influenced by his advisors. Instead of caring for his people he destroyed them. King Nebuchadnezzar invaded and literally scattered the nation.

God intervenes as Shepherd to reunite the nation and predicts a true shepherd, the Messiah, who will do what a shepherd should - bringing unity; safety; and peace and security.

- ✦ Psalm 23 is the great shepherd psalm:

This is at the emotional core of our faith but as one commentator says, *depth and strength underlie the simplicity of the psalm. Its peace is not escape; its contentment is not complacency.* (Kidner)

At the heart of the Psalm is the assurance - The Lord IS - therefore I SHALL!

The key words - **restore; path; lead;** and the theme of direction and discipline all talk about good shepherding.

But it is specific too:

- only God can lead us safely through death;
- only in God is test turned into triumph;
- only with God do you arrive as a guest and end up as a member of the resident family!

- ✦ Mark picks up Jesus comment that the people were **like sheep without a shepherd.**

When the Lectionary misses chunks of the passage out - as it does today - you should always be aware of what is being missed - in this instance the two great events of the feeding of the 5000 and then Jesus walking on water. Perhaps it is so that we don't get distracted by the spectacular and miss the point Mark has been making since Easter - it is all out our relationship with Jesus!

Such were the needs of the people that the disciples had been out on a mission and, when they return to report back to Jesus, there is so much still to do that **they had no leisure even to eat.**

Jesus leads by example and cares for the carers and they set out by boat for a break - but the people travel on foot. It was at this point that Jesus didn't get angry but felt sympathy.

It was when he sent his disciples back by boat that he ended up catching them up by walking on the water.

Paul alone avoids mention of a shepherd! Yet he sums up what is important - because a shepherd isn't much use without sheep and sheep are annoying.

- ✦ Jews had hope and hatred almost in equal measure. God had chosen them and they were the 'covenant' sheep - no other breeds were allowed.
- ✦ Gentiles were without God - the Stoics believed that every 3000 years the earth recreated itself - their hope was for destruction and a future they could not share in.
- ✦ The physical evidence of the sheep pen was the wall in the Temple at Jerusalem - attested to by the historian Josephus - where a wall on stilts 3 cubits high promised death to any gentiles who passed.
- ✦ Hatred and barriers too often define human relationships - but Jesus makes the difference.
- ✦ **In Christ** is a new status:
 - Peace between us and God and between each other is bought by blood
 - Law is obliterated and replaced by the simple law of love
 - In Christ we begin again and belong together
 - Through Christ we have equal access to God
- ✦ Two things result (in line with Psalm 23) - we are **no longer strangers but citizens** and we are all part of **one building** with Christ as the key stone holding it together.

In Christ we are neither hybrids nor mongrels - but pedigree sheep of his flock.