

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B
July 21, 2024

It has been so very good to experience the Eucharistic Congress this week, especially so since we journeyed through these past several days with our catechists from Holy Trinity and several of our young people as well.

Good speakers... Good liturgies... And so many faithful Catholics, tens of thousands in all, all praying and experiencing the Eucharist together. Remarkable! A great blessing to be sure.

We hope to share more reflections on this once-in-a-lifetime event in next week's bulletin. All in all, a wonderful event! More to follow.

And now the very briefest of reflections on three of today's readings: our Old Testament reading from the Prophet Jeremiah; Psalm 23, our responsorial psalm; and our Gospel reading from Mark all employ a metaphor that would have been instantly recognized by the Jewish people of Jesus' day. Indeed, the Jewish Scriptures often referred to Israel as a flock of sheep, a flock of sheep that was entirely dependent on the protection and guidance of a good and faithful shepherd.

At first glance, this image of sheep in need of a shepherd may seem to have little to do with an event like the Eucharistic Congress. After all, few metaphors are powerful enough to retain their relevance across several millennia. Stay tuned, however, but for a moment. The connection is there, and – as we shall see – it's here among us as well. First our readings...

The prophet Jeremiah lived in Israel during a perilous time, the seventh and sixth century B.C. He preached against Israel's corrupt and complacent leaders and suffered greatly for it. It did not end well for Jeremiah. But here's the thing. He was right in what he said. Jeremiah was right. Jerusalem would soon be conquered, and Israel's elite would be carried off to captivity in Babylon.

Here's what's so remarkable about today's reading from Jeremiah, however. God is so disappointed in Israel's shepherds that he promises something that must of have been unimaginable – a blasphemy, in fact – to Jeremiah's audience: *"I myself,"* God says, *"will gather*

the remnant of my flock from all the lands to which they have been driven and bring them back to their meadow.” “I myself,” a vow that would be fulfilled in the Incarnation of Our Lord Jesus.

This promise to personally take up the role of the Good Shepherd is echoed in our responsorial psalm, Psalm 23: *“The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want. In verdant pastures, he gives me repose.”*

And in our Gospel reading, Jesus himself is looking for rest – for repose – for himself and for his disciples. But he is besieged, instead, by a crowd of desperate seekers looking for a good word about the Father’s love or a healing, perhaps, for themselves or for a loved one. Recalling the Prophet Jeremiah, Jesus notes that they were *“like sheep without a shepherd.”* So what does Jesus do? He assumes the role of the Good Shepherd, of course, leading them to *“verdant pastures.”* Yes, *“he began to teach them many things.”*

So what does this powerful metaphor concerning sheep and shepherds have to do with the Eucharist? Everything in fact... Consider the very end of John’s Gospel. The Risen Lord meets his disciples for the last time on the shores of the Lake of Galilee. There he enters into a remarkable conversation with Peter who – as we all know – had denied him three times: *“When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?’ Peter responded, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ Jesus then said to him a second time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter again responded, ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter was distressed that he had said to him a third time, ‘Do you love me?’ and he said to him, ‘Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my sheep.’”*

Peter, of course, represents the Church, and it is to the Church that we come to be fed with the very bread of life – the Eucharist – that we will experience again in but a few moments. Good shepherd, indeed!