

Today's readings talk a lot about shepherds, something that is foreign to most people in our present day society. So let's delve into this imagery a little bit.

In the first reading we hear God say, "Woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture." Now needless to say, this is not a good thing. When we hear the word "Woe," especially when we hear it in the Bible, we should tremble in fear, because this is meant to evoke the wrath of God, and believe me, you don't want to experience the wrath of God. And God is upset, because the Kings of Israel, the people who were supposed to lead the people, were instead misleading the people.

You see, the job of a shepherd is to lead the flock. The shepherd is responsible for keeping the flock safe from danger. He is to nourish the flock so that it can grow. But the kings of Israel were not doing this. They were committing sin after sin. They were concerned for their own well being, but not the well being of their people.

So God finally decides that He will come to shepherd His people. He will be the one who will lead the people, who will nourish them and keep them safe from evil. Now, of course we know he does this in the person of Jesus, who we see taking on that role of shepherd in today's Gospel. Now there's a lot going on here. First, like what we heard in the reading from Jeremiah, there is a recognition that the people have no shepherd. The Gospel says that they were like sheep without a shepherd. And Jesus' reaction to this situation is one of pity.

Now that reaction of Jesus' reveals a great deal. It reveals that for sheep to have no shepherd is indeed a pitiable condition. And God recognizes it as such. When there is no shepherd, there is no one to tell us right from wrong. There is no one who will protect us from evil. There is no one who will nourish us so that we can grow. So when we have no shepherd, we have no direction, no purpose. We wander aimlessly, and in all likelihood will fall prey to some evil ploy.

So Jesus recognizes that the people have no shepherd, and he immediately takes on that role, and he nourishes the people. And he does this first through teaching, and then later through food. This juxtaposition demonstrates that it is Christ's teaching that is to be the food that nourishes us. And in doing so there is benefit for the people. Psalm 23 reminds us that when we accept the Lord as our shepherd, we will have no need for fear. Man, wouldn't that be great. How many of us live in fear? How many of us fear our current economic crisis, or the rising violence, or any number of things in our society? Wouldn't it be nice to live without that fear. Better yet, Psalm 23 says that when the Lord is our shepherd, we will be led to verdant pastures, and given rest, and only goodness and kindness will follow us all the days of our life. So this is all really good.

Now the catch of course, is that we actually have to allow Christ to be our shepherd. And I think this is something that we as human beings tend to be notoriously bad at doing. So often we like to be our own shepherd. We want to be the ones in control, we want to decide what we are going to do, where we are going to do it, and how we are going to live. But when we do this, we are not listening to the voice of the shepherd, and we are instead listening to our own voice. And we become those pitiable sheep without a shepherd.

So how do we prevent this from happening? How do we prevent ourselves from becoming like those pitiable people who had no shepherd?

Well, I think one way we do this is by living our Catholic life to its fullest. That we participate in the sacraments (all the sacraments) and that we adhere to the Church's moral teachings, because when we follow the Church's teachings, we are safeguarded by a shepherd. Remember that after His resurrection, Jesus gave Peter the responsibility of tending the flock and feeding the sheep. That role of shepherding, of course, has been passed from Jesus to Peter down through the ages to our current Pope, Benedict XVI. And to ensure that the Church would not error, Jesus gave the Holy Spirit to the Church to preserve it from error on issues of faith and morals. So when we live our Catholic lives, we can be assured that we are indeed listening to the voice of our true shepherd.

And when we live this life, we should do so with pride. Not a sinful pride mind, you. But we should live this live publicly and unafraid. We should not apologize for our faith, as if it is something to be ashamed of. No, instead we should be apologists for our faith, proclaiming our faith boldly, and living our faith publicly. We should not shy away from issues where our faith is at odds with the values of our society, such as on the role of religion in the public sphere or moral teachings on life, economics and human sexuality, instead we should take in these teachings that the shepherd has given us as nourishment, and we should call the rest of our society to do likewise.

When we take in these teachings, we become like those who took in the teachings of Jesus in today's Gospel. We become transformed. Our pitiable condition of being sheep without a shepherd is transformed. We become empowered to live not in fear, but in freedom, knowing that our shepherd will protect us from all evil, and lead us to verdant pastures where we will dwell for years to come.