

Introducción



Who holds power is called to perform a service to the brethren, but is also subject to the temptation to abuse one's own position of prestige and use it to impose oneself, to further one's own personal or family interests. The author of the Book of Wisdom warns: "For the lowly there may be excuses and pardon, but the great will be severely punished" (Wis 6:5-6).

The domination of others is strictly prohibited in the Christian community (Lk 22:25). Christ does not claim a power conferred by the institution to ask the disciples adherence to his proposal of life. He precedes the flock, feeds it with his word and his bread and attracts it by his example.

In the church, who leads cannot but reproduce the pattern of the Master. Peter, reproved by Jesus several times for his eagerness to stand out, recommended to the priests of his community: "Shepherd

the flock which God has entrusted to you, guarding it not out of obligation but willingly for God's sake; not as one looking for a reward but with a generous heart; do not lord it over those in your care rather be an example to your flock" (1 Pet 5:1-2).

Whoever wrote the following reflection for the scout leader seems to have in mind this recommendation: "Remember, scout leader, if you slow down, they stop; if you give in, they shrink back; if you sit down, they lie down; if you doubt, they despair; if you criticize, they break down; if you walk forward, they will overtake you; if you give your hand, they will give their skin; if you pray, they shall be holy."

To internalize the message, we repeat:

*"Only by following the only true shepherd, I shall not want."*

-----[First Reading](#) | [Second Reading](#) | [Gospel](#)-----

### **First Reading: Jeremiah 23:1-6**

Jeremiah pronounced this oracle during a very difficult social and political time around the end of the seventh century B.C. The prophet had placed great hopes in the young King Josiah who seemed to have been inspired by the Lord to gather the lost tribes of Israel. But in an unfortunate battle in the plain of Megiddo, this wise and pious king dies tragically. His son Jehoiakim ascends the throne. He is a coward, a corrupt lover of luxury, does not care for the poor but thinks of constructing beautiful palaces, does not pay the workers, commits harassment and allows the innocent to be punished and the culprits to be absolved in court. He is politically inept: he forms an alliance with Egypt and senselessly challenges the Babylonian Empire that is at the height of power. Nebuchadnezzar confronts and crushes him. After a few months Jehoiakim dies, probably assassinated by his political opponents. His son is immediately taken prisoner by Nebuchadnezzar and replaced by another son of Josiah, Mattani'ah, who was given the name of Zedekiah.

The situation does not improve because Zedekiah lacks personality and is surrounded by insane advisers who urge him to take up arms against Babylon. It is disastrous! Jerusalem is reduced to a pile of rubble and the people are deported to a foreign land.

It is in this historical context that the oracle proposed in today's reading is placed.

The onset (v. 1) consists of an irrevocable condemnation by the Lord of political leaders. They, with the exception of the pious Josiah, have proved themselves unfaithful to God and insensitive to the words of the prophets. They are compared to shepherds who, instead of being caring and attentive to the needs of the flock entrusted to them, they lead them to ruin.

This is not the first time that the prophet uses this image. He has already done it before and always to deplore the actions of the leaders of the people: "For the pastors have become senseless and have not consulted the Lord; and all their flocks are scattered" (Jer 10:21).

Now that the situation has become more dramatic, the Lord resorts to threats: Woe to the shepherds! I

will deal with you because of your evil deeds (vv. 1-2).

After this sentence of condemnation against the leaders, the prophet turns to the people: discouraged, without a guide. He tries to revive him. There is one reason for hope: Israel is not a member of any human king, even though the unworthy rulers have made the masters. It is God's flock; he will personally take care of his sheep and bring them back to their land, in the pastures from where they were torn by violence (vv. 3-4).

To comfort Israel, Jeremiah does not limit himself to the immediate future. He announces what the Lord will do at an even more distant time. He will raise up in the family of David a righteous branch, a wise king who will exercise wise judgment, and righteousness in all the earth (vv. 5-6).

Jeremiah hopes, probably, in the providential appearance of a new sovereign, capable of restoring the kingdom to the splendor it had at the time of David and Solomon. He also announces the name. He will be called the "Lord-our righteousness" in Hebrew *Ja Sidqénu*, an obvious allusion to *Sidqíja*, Zedekiah, the inept ruler in office who has not established justice nor protected his people.

The prophecy has been fulfilled, but not according to human expectations. God has exceeded all expectations. The promised shepherd has not restored a kingdom of this world, has not given prosperity only to a nation and has not subjected people by force of arms.

The shepherd, the promised son of David, we can identify him today: it is Jesus of Nazareth. He is *Ja Sidqénu*, "the Lord our righteousness," because he started a reign of peace and justice, not imposing himself by force of arms, but by changing hearts. His reign, seemingly without a future, because it is deprived of those supports in which people are pinning hopes of success, is instead intended to extend over all the earth and to last forever.

## **Second Reading: Ephesians 2:13-18**

Throughout the Roman Empire, Jews were known for their isolationism; Tacitus labels them with the title of "enemies of the human race." A meter and a half high wall surrounded the holy area of the temple in Jerusalem. On it, thirteen blocks of marble bore the inscription, in Greek and Latin, the prohibition to Gentiles, on pain of death, to enter the holy enclosure. It was a sign of separation, which Israel believed willed by God, between two peoples: one is "the elect," the only heirs of the blessings promised to Abraham and his descendants, on the other "the foreigners," who are excluded from salvation.

Addressing the latter, the author of the Letter to the Ephesians proclaims the end of this contrast, established by people, not by God. Christ has reconciled the two peoples forever: "But now in Christ Jesus and by his blood, you who were once far off have come near." He has made the two peoples one, destroying in his own flesh the wall—the hatred—which separated us (v. 13).

Then he explains the way in which, of the two, he made one people.

He is our peace, the "Prince of Peace" announced by Isaiah (Is 9:6), the "Lord of peace" promised by

Micah (Mic 5:4), sent to take down the fences and barriers that separate, to put an end to all division among peoples, because all are equally loved by God (v. 14).

He achieved this by repealing the Jewish law that, in order to preserve the people from the impurity of the Gentiles, sanctioned and blessed the separation (v. 15) and he has reconciled the two peoples.

Not only, but, by his incarnation, he also abolished the distance between God and man; he united heaven and earth, announcing peace, peace to those who were far off and peace to those who were near (vv. 16-17).

In these sweet expressions the prophecy of Isaiah echoes: “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news of joy, who herald peace” (Is 52:7).

The passage ends with a great image, derived from court’s ceremonial. United by the one Spirit, infused in all by Christ, Jews and Gentiles, near and far, they present themselves together in a solemn procession to the Father (v. 18).

Inspired by this Spirit, the Christian cannot be but a peacemaker. As Christ he is committed to tear down all the walls that still prevent people to meet. He does not get involved in conversations that emphasized what divides, the wrongs, past misunderstandings. He rejects prejudices, discriminations and all sorts of caste and believes in dialogue between peoples, cultures, races, religions.

### **Gospel: Mark 6:30-34**

He who works needs to take a break. Paul who was engaged in apostolic work for many years says, it is “hard work” (2 Cor 11:23). That’s why, at the return from their mission, the apostles are invited by Jesus to rest for a while. The episode itself may seem rather trivial, but the evangelist brings it back because it contains important messages for the disciples of Christ.

In the first part (vv. 30-32) the apostles returning satisfied from their mission are introduced. They gather around the Master, and report what they have done and taught. After listening, he invites them to retire with him apart into a desert place, away from the crowds.

The scene of Jesus leaving with the disciples is repeated often in the Gospel of Mark. It always prepares for a major revelation. After Jesus had told parables to the crowds, in private, he explained everything to his disciples (Mk 4:34). “Apart from the crowd” he cures the deaf and dumb man of Bethsaida (Mk 7:33); leads Peter, James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration “apart by themselves” (Mk 9:2). It is “in private” that he responds to the disciples who ask for explanations about the end of the world (Mk 13:3) and the reason why they failed to cast out a demon (Mk 9:28).

In our passage the phrase is repeated twice “on the sidelines” and is accentuated by the fact that “Jesus and the twelve are alone” on a boat, in silence, slowly moving away on the lake.

The first message, the most simple and straightforward, Mark intends to direct it to those who, in the Christian community, have the responsibility of leadership and of announcing the word of God. He

wants them to compare their apostolic zeal with that of the twelve, and learn to serve the brothers with such dedication and love even having no more time to eat.

The main message is, however, another and must be grasped in the expression “apart” that sets the tone for the entire passage.

Service to the community requires much effort and great generosity. However, there is a need to be attentive because it can easily turn into frenzied activity, assessed according to the criteria of enterprise productivity; then the danger of losing contact with the giver of the work, with Christ and his word, looms even on the most generous ministers.

The apostles gather around the Master and evaluate with him, what they did and taught. They show what should be the benchmark of all apostolic activity. Before implementing projects there is a need of a sincere meeting with the Master, to receive from him the instructions on the task at hand and to feel being sent by him. Programs cannot be elaborated without a constant reference to the gospel. The choices, initiatives that do not come from prayer, meditation and community reflection of God’s word, are likely to be dictated by human standards. Behind the screen of the charitable and beneficent work, sometimes, less noble goals, ambitions, personal interests, desire to compete, to impose, to proselytize are hidden.

It is true that all of life is prayer, that in the poor one meets God, in the service of others one works in the name of Christ. However, if one does not reserve spaces and moments of silence where one is alone with the Lord, if one does not get away from the crowds and activities that absorb all time and energy, one ends up in atrophy.

Even during the implementation of apostolic programs we must, at all times, let Christ challenge us. The reference to his word and to the completed work must not be missing. To “withdraw to the sidelines” is always necessary to evaluate with him, as did the twelve, what has been achieved. Only those who act in this way can fuel the belief that they are not “of working or have worked in vain” (Gal 2:2).

The rest of Jesus and of the apostles did not last long, only the time of crossing of the lake.

In the second part of the passage (vv. 33-34), here they are, in fact, back in the midst of the crowd that flocked from all over, waiting for them on the shore.

The occupants of the boat represent the Christian community which, after taking a good time to reflect on itself and to be with the Master, now returns to the service of people. Its withdrawing apart was not an escape, but a spiritual recharge. When they are bearers of a divine word that instills hope and communicates salvation, the disciples are always eagerly awaited and welcomed with joy.

The encounter of Jesus with the crowd stirs a very strong emotional reaction. To describe it, the evangelist uses the greek word *splagknízomai*. It expresses a feeling of compassion so deep and so intense that it can be proved only by God. The Bible indicates the tender and loving gesture of the Lord who stoops to bandage the wounds.

Mark has already pointed out this feeling in Jesus when a leper, on his knees, begged him (Mk 1:40-41) and, again, he will reveal it to the hungry multitudes, “I feel sorry for these people, because they have been with me for three days and now have nothing to eat” (Mk 8:2). The reaction of Jesus reveals God’s tenderness in front of human pain.

When misery, evil, pain are caused by sin, the spontaneous and natural reaction is to wait or, in the case of others, even to invoke the divine punishment, considered an expression of perfect justice. In the emotion of Jesus, the Christian community captures the unique feeling that she too must make shine: always and only mercy.

The evangelist completes the scene with an image of an unmatched beauty and a sweetness, “He had compassion on them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd” (v. 34).

The image recalls the various texts of the Old Testament. The first reference is to the prayer that, coming to the conclusion of the exodus from Egypt, Moses said to the Lord. Fearing that after his death, Israel would remain without a guide, worried, he begged this grace: “May the God of the spirits that give life, appoint a leader for this community, who shall go out and come in at their head, that the community of the Lord may not be like sheep without a shepherd” (Num 27:16-17).

The image also alludes to the accusations of the prophets against the leaders who led the nation to ruin: “They have scattered for want of a shepherd and became prey of wild animals. My sheep wandered over the mountains and high hills and no one bothers about them or looks for them” (Ezk 34:5-6) and the famous Psalm: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” (Ps 23:1).

Returning to the image of the shepherd, Mark shows in Jesus the guide sent by God in answer to the prayer of Moses, and in fulfillment of the promises made by the prophets. In Israel, there were those who presented themselves as shepherds: the scribes, the Pharisees, the rabbis, political leaders, King Herod; but they fed themselves, not the people.

Jesus is the true shepherd because he reveals a heart sensitive to the needs of the people, a heart that immediately perceives what kind of food they are hungry and what kind of water they are thirsty. He has in mind the words of the prophet: “Days are coming when I will send famine upon the land, not hunger for bread or thirst for water, but for hearing the word of the Lord. Men will stagger from sea to sea, wander to and fro, from north to east, searching for the word of the Lord, but they will not find it” (Am 8:11-12).

The leaders of the people were not able to satisfy this hunger and thirst, in fact, with their false doctrines, they had led the people in the lurch. Jesus then began to distribute his bread, the twofold bread: the teaching that feeds the mind and the heart and the food that feeds the body.

Today’s passage concludes observing that Jesus “began a long teaching session with them” (v. 34). He was not broken down, nor cursed those responsible for the painful condition in which the people had been reduced. He began to teach, above all because this is the bread that man needs.

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