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Jesus, the Compassionate Shepherd of God

Gospel Reflection for 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time B

Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, JULY 15, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- The themes of sheep and shepherding flow through the Scripture readings for the Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B). The moving Gospel story of Jesus having compassion on the crowds that were "like sheep without a shepherd" helps us to focus on his ministry of teaching, reconciling and shepherding.

Literature of antiquity often referred to the person responsible for guiding a community as a shepherd. Likewise, the Old Testament frequently described the Lord himself as the shepherd of his people. Individuals invoked him as "my shepherd" (Psalm 23:1), and the community prayed to him as the "Shepherd of Israel" (Psalm 80:1).

In the New Testament, the image of the shepherd expresses great authority and responsibility. Nourishing the flock means that the shepherd must protect them from heresy, ever ready to defend the sheep from marauders. John tells us that Jesus himself proclaimed that he fulfilled Israel's hope for the coming of the good shepherd: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11).

When Jesus withdraws with his disciples to a deserted place to rest, he attracts a great number of people to follow them. Toward this people of the new exodus Jesus is moved with pity; he satisfies their spiritual hunger by teaching them many things, thus gradually showing himself the faithful shepherd of a new Israel.

When the Scriptures describe Jesus as having pity on his flock because they were "like sheep without a shepherd" in Mark 6:30-34, such an image is not original to Jesus in the Gospels. The image is drawn from Ezekiel 34, where God unleashes his anger at the shepherds of Israel who have fattened themselves on the weak and vulnerable, instead of caring for them (Ezekiel 34:10-12).

Sheep without a shepherd

Jesus' compassion is much more than a fleeting or temporary feeling of regret or sorrow. It is rather a deep anguish, a gut-wrenching type of anxiety and sorrow over the condition of people. Jesus was describing the spiritual lives of those who were living outside of the salvation so freely offered by God. Jesus felt gut-wrenching anguish over the souls of these people who were facing spiritual starvation without someone to feed them, teach them, and lead them to true spiritual nourishment. They were in danger without a shepherd to protect them from false teaching. Like sheep without the good shepherd, they were alone and vulnerable to the attacks of the evil one, who roams around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

"Like sheep without a shepherd" is an accurate description of the spiritual lives of many 21st-century Christians in the world today. The expression describes many of our contemporaries who are directionless, helpless, and very vulnerable to the seductions and attacks of the evil one. "Sheep without a shepherd" are

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more than just a little lost. They are more than just a little vulnerable. They are facing danger and destruction.

Jesus' Compassion

Jesus saw the sick and his compassion healed them. He saw those possessed by demons and his compassion freed them. He told the story of a king who was owed a huge debt by his servant. When the servant could not pay, the king ordered him thrown into slavery, along with his family. When the servant pleaded for mercy the king "had compassion" on him and forgave the huge debt.

Jesus spoke about a man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. That poor fellow fell among thieves who beat him, robbed him and left him to die. Two high-ranking religious officials passed by him, but a Samaritan stopped and "had compassion" on him. He bandaged the man's wounds and carried him to an inn where he nursed him through the night. The next day he paid the bill and gave the innkeeper his credit line, saying, "If he needs more, charge it to me."

Who can forget the thought-provoking story of the younger son who took his inheritance and squandered it in loose living? One day he "came to himself" and returned to his father's house, not hoping to be restored as a son, but wanting only to be hired as a servant. His father saw him coming and "had compassion" on him. Before the son could even utter his speech of repentance, the father placed on him a ring and robe and shoes and called for a royal feast.

The compassion of Jesus heals and feeds, forgives huge debts, nurses hurt bodies back to health and welcomes home sinners, restoring them to a place of honor. Jesus will not let his compassion stay with God or in heaven. He commands us: "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate."

Jesus did a lot more than just feel compassion for those in today's Gospel story from Mark 6. His strong emotion moved him to act, far beyond what any shepherd would be expected to do for his sheep. The authentic shepherd, who models his or her life on Jesus, must love the people entrusted to him and imitate Jesus.

Where will we find such compassion for ourselves?

From time to time, despite our best intentions, we find ourselves among those in need, those who are like sheep without a shepherd. At times we ask ourselves: "Where on earth can we find this compassion to share with others?" I have learned that only in solitude before God, faced only with ourselves, can we learn the compassion of God. Perhaps it is not by accident that in the thick of his ministry and burdened by the unrelenting needs and demands of the crowd, Jesus called his disciples to join him in the desert: "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile."

Could it not be the same for us, that away from the hustle and bustle of the everyday demands, we retreat in order to wrestle with our own hearts before God? And there we learn mercy and become in our day bearers of the compassion of Christ.

Leading people out

One of the most powerful and moving reflections on the theme of compassionate shepherding is found in Benedict XVI's inaugural homily of his Petrine Ministry on April 24, 2005:

"The pastor must be inspired by Christ's holy zeal: for him it is not a matter of indifference that so many people are living in the desert. And there are so many kinds of desert. There is the desert of poverty, the desert of hunger and thirst, the desert of abandonment, of loneliness, of destroyed love.

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"There is the desert of God's darkness, the emptiness of souls no longer aware of their dignity or the goal of human life. The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast. Therefore the earth's treasures no longer serve to build God's garden for all to live in, but they have been made to serve the powers of exploitation and destruction.

"The Church as a whole and all her Pastors, like Christ, must set out to lead people out of the desert, towards the place of life, towards friendship with the Son of God, towards the One who gives us life, and life in abundance."

This week may our prayer be for awareness, compassion and courage. Let us beg the Lord to make us more aware of the vast and growing deserts in which our contemporaries, and perhaps even we are living today. Let us ask the Lord to give us his compassion for those who truly are sheep without shepherds. And let us pray for courage to help lead our friends out of their deserts and into the places of life and friendship with Christ, the Good Shepherd.

[The readings for the 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time B are Jeremiah 23:1-6; Ephesians 2:13-18; and Mark 6:30-34]

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Basilian Father Thomas Rosica, chief executive officer of the Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation and Television Network in Canada, is a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. He can be reached at: rosica@saltandlighttv.org.

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On the Net:

Salt and Light: www.saltandlighttv.org

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