

Jeremiah 23: 1-6 & Mark 6: 30-44--Tending to Sheep

The first reading for today from Jeremiah, or at least a portion of it, is familiar to us from the readings associated with Advent. We, as did the early church fathers, associate Christ with the words of the Lord reported by Jeremiah, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." But aside from that imagery of Christ as the righteous Branch, this passage is also deeply concerned with the condition of the people in the present. Using the concept of shepherds and their responsibilities Jeremiah gives a common metaphor from the ancient Near East to speak of human kings and leaders as shepherds to the people. The imagery is appropriate since the duties and responsibilities of shepherds would be well known to his audience. Even though the actual occupation was not highly thought of in those days everyone knew shepherds were supposed to take care of their sheep. Feed them; protect them; guide them. This meant providing sustenance for the flock, defending it against attackers, searching for ones who have gone astray, keeping peace within the flock as well as rescuing those in danger. In other words, the king as shepherd is to act for the well being of the people. In Jeremiah's time the kings have not been good shepherds given that the sheep are finding themselves taken into exile, away from their homes and scattered among the nations. Given that even Jeremiah uses the plural for shepherds in this passage, it is clear that the blame is placed not only on one king or leader, but many. In previous passages Jeremiah has stated how the kings have failed in their duty to "execute justice in the morning and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed" (22:12a). Their eyes and hearts are set on "dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence (22:17). These are the basis for the indictment against those who have led the people. Following these accusations chapter 23 opens with this statement: "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture, says the Lord." Ezekiel, a contemporary of Jeremiah spelled out transgressions of the leaders in more detail describing how rather than feeding the sheep they had fed themselves, gathering the fat and the wool for their own use. So judgment is pronounced by both these prophets from the Lord. What meaning in today's world do these opening verses have for us? As we read this passage we are also called to consider and take stock of our own society and the way we conduct our affairs in relationship to those who might be considered belonging to the groups failing to receive justice. These verses should cause us to some serious self examination. It would be easy to point at those who are in charge, whether of religious institutions or political ones. What about our contributions to the current state of affairs? Do we call to account those who put forth policies which hurt those in need? Do we take a stand when we see someone treated unfairly? Where have we as the church, that priesthood of all believers, failed to tend to the vulnerable? All of us in a church made up of the priesthood of all believers, bear responsibility for the well-being of all our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are charged to minister to one another. This text becomes for us an equal opportunity accuser. Yet this text also contains the promise of the Lord that he will attend to the flock. God will be the shepherd by raising up that righteous Branch. In our passage from the gospel of Mark, Jesus is seeking to go to a deserted place with the disciples who have newly returned from their first mission to take his message to the people. Jesus tells them to come away for a while and rest so they once again get in a boat and

leave that area where so many are coming and going seeking their aid that they didn't even have time to eat. But going away by themselves did not turn out to be possible because they were recognized. Not only were they followed, but their destination was anticipated and a many arrived at their landing site before they did. When Jesus and the disciples arrived we are told that as Jesus looked at the crowd, he had compassion for them "because they were like sheep without a shepherd." This is an example of Jesus taking on the proper role of shepherd, caring for the lost who have been scattered and oppressed. Jesus responds to the needs of the crowd to be shepherded. As usual, Mark does not record what Jesus taught the crowd, only that he spent the rest of the day until near evening tending to them. There is no mention of healing involved in this story of tending, only Jesus showing compassion and spending time teaching them. This is an echo not only of Jeremiah's description of the people, but of Moses' plea in Numbers 27:17 to the Lord that the congregation of the Lord not be left with no one to guide them like sheep without a shepherd. Despite the fact that the disciples have just come back from what was reported to be a successful mission of teaching and healing, we are not told what they were doing during this day until late in the day. However, late in the day, the disciples come to Jesus and tell him he should send the people away because they are in a deserted place and the people need to go and find food for themselves in the surrounding countryside. It may be a small thing, but when those chosen by Jesus for that mission left and came back they were called apostles. In this passage, they are once again called disciples. Perhaps because their responses to the gathered crowd did not demonstrate the compassion which Jesus felt was called for. It is true that Jesus himself had said they were going to a place for some R& R, not further ministry. But the need of the crowd came first for Jesus. His response to their request must have shocked them. Jesus did not agree and send the crowd away. Instead we are told "he answered them, 'You give them something to eat.' Jesus tells the disciples he expects them to provide for the people. Here again Mark is pointing out the shortcomings of those disciples. The disciples respond to Jesus' instruction to feed the crowd with a protest, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" They have not understood the concept that they are to tend to the people; they do not comprehend God's economy of abundance. We are familiar with the remainder of the story. Jesus sends the disciples out to find what resources are available, the two fish and five loaves are found, which when he blesses them become enough to not only feed the five thousand men, but the leftovers were enough to fill twelve baskets with bread and bits of fish: enough leftovers that each disciple can have his own full basket of food. Where the disciples saw scarcity, Jesus showed them abundance. Jesus first supplied the people with the nourishment of his teaching then he provided them with bodily sustenance. In Jeremiah we learned that God assumed the role of shepherd to the people; the supplier of their needs; their protector and rescuer who would provide for them. In Jesus, we see the fulfillment of that promise as he lived the role of the Good Shepherd, healing and ministering to needs both physical and spiritual. In Jeremiah we get a glimpse of the characteristics of a proper leader or shepherd: the execution of justice and righteousness in the land. In the life of Jesus we get a picture of what that leadership looks like—tending to the needs of the people. Today, as Disciples of Christ we are both sheep of his flock and deputized shepherds sent out to bring the kingdom near by our participation in the work begun by Jesus. The primary work of transformation of people and the world is done by God, of course, just as it is in the text it is

Jesus who blesses and breaks the bread. But in Christ we are all kings and priests no longer merely subjects and bystanders for whom others provide guidance and mediation; we are no longer merely sheep. Of course since we are under God we never cease to be sheep, fed by word and sacrament, but we are empowered sheep. We are fed so that we may feed others, blessed to be a blessing to others, loved in order to love others, strengthened in order to give strength to others. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.