

THE SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME - B

The gospel reading sees the return of the apostles from their mission tired and hassled, and they are taken away by Jesus for a de-briefing session. They thought they had escaped from the crowd but they were followed and Jesus teaches the apostles a good lesson, he doesn't drive the crowd away but takes pity, teaches and later feeds them. Jesus shows himself to be the good shepherd while Jeremiah in the first reading tells of Israel's poor shepherds, how God will punish them and look after his sheep himself. The second reading continues with Ephesians and Paul's teaching that by the blood of Christ Jew and gentile are united in a single body. Teaching that the Israelite shepherds failed to give and a sample of the teaching Jesus gives at the end of the gospel reading.

The **First Reading** is from the prophet Jeremiah, one of the major-prophets in Israel. He was called by God as a young man in the reign of Josiah, who was a good king of Judah and led hopes of reform and a return to Godly ways. Josiah was killed in battle in 609 and with the rise of the Chaldean empire, king Nebuchadnezzar imposed his rule on Judah who sort support from Egypt. They revolted twice, in 597 and 587, which resulted in the capture and destruction of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem, many of its inhabitants being carried off into slavery in Babylon. Jeremiah lived and worked in these final traumatic days, preaching, issuing threats of God's anger and foretelling the final disaster. He suffered greatly not only from those who considered him a defeatist because he was opposed to war as a solution to Judah's problems but also from his own inner conflicts. A man of peace he had to fight against the whole population from kings and priests to false prophets and the whole nation. He was a Job-like figure inwardly tortured by the work God had given him to do, but all this helped to purify his soul and he saw Israel's relationship with God in a new light. God looks at the heart and rewards each according to their works. So the new covenant, 31.31, expresses a new start, a new relationship with God, the Law will no longer be written on tablets of stone but within the hearts of the people of Israel. Jeremiah died a failure, a fugitive in Egypt, but his teachings grew in importance in helping to shape the future of Israel.

Today's reading, 23.1-6, is one of the later prophecies in the book. Jeremiah has no comforting words for the shepherds of Israel. They have 'scattered', 'driven away' and 'not taken care' of God's flock. They have earned God's punishment and God will gather in those few, the remnant, who are left. For them God has very encouraging and comforting words. Even in this traumatic time in Israel's history God is there promising better times. The reading ends with God's words promising 'an upright Branch of David.' These words are seen to be fulfilled in Jesus by descent a son of David, whose name, 'Yahweh-is-our-Saving-Justice', fixes his destiny and tells us that he participates in God's saving justice.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 22, is one of the most well known psalms, the Lord is my Shepherd. This psalm is used today first in response to those who failed in their duty and then celebrating the shepherding of the people of Israel by God throughout the OT. The first half of the psalm shows God's care for the upright, as a shepherd should he leads his flock to the right places. In the second part of the psalm the shepherd is host at the messianic banquet.

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. If you have time read the whole of this wonderful letter, it's only six chapters long. The letter was written while Paul was imprisoned in Rome (61-63 A.D.) and he follows what he taught in Colossians about the subordinate place of the powers of the universe by teaching that the Church as the Body of Christ embraces the whole of the new universe, 'the fullness of him who is filled, all in all.' He then deals with the continuous problem of Jew and gentile. Salvation is a gift given by God through Christ and this salvation is available equally to Jew and gentile, this shows something of the infinite wisdom of the mystery of God's inexhaustible love. In the last analysis God's plans are seen to be fulfilled in Christ, and in the Church the extension of Christ through history. This unity in Christ is incompatible with any lack of charity for their attitude to each other is the measure of their attitude to Christ in whom all are one.

In today's reading, 2.13-18, Paul is dealing with a widespread and persistent problem in the early Church, the reconciliation of the Jews and gentiles with each other and with God. The 'you' and 'us', and 'you who were far away' and 'those who were near' refer to gentile and Jew respectively in the reading. Paul is at pains to make clear that the far away gentiles have been brought close to 'us', the Jewish Christians, by the blood of Christ. Christ is the bonding peace, breaking down separating barriers and removing the hostility of the Law by his death on the cross 'to unite them both in a single Body (Christ's) and reconcile them with God.' Jew and gentile, says Paul, have been made one body, all hostility has been removed, Christ's peace has been given and the gift of the Spirit, our way to the Father. Sound advice when we fall out with our neighbour.

