

The 23rd Psalm is read on Good Shepherd Sunday, the 4th Sunday after the Epiphany. This year we get a double dose and we see again those familiar images of God as our shepherd who provides green pastures, still waters, safe passage and protection for his sheep and the promise that we will “dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” The psalm is comforting and reassuring and it reminds us that there is only one king and that king is not Caesar, was never Caesar, and never will be a secular ruler. Therefore the psalm is the key to this week’s readings from Jeremiah and the gospel of Mark.

You might remember that the prophet Samuel was the last judge, the last non-king of Israel. In his old age the people of Israel came to him and asked for a king so that they could be like all the other peoples around them. The Lord was not pleased because what made these chosen people different was that the one Lord and one King of Israel and was God, the God who had made covenants with Abraham and Moses, the God who had led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt, had given them the land of Israel, and the commandments by which they were to live. They were so grateful all that they wanted a secular king. God says to Samuel that they will get their king and God has also told Samuel to warn the people of Israel that their king will not behave as they had hoped and that God will leave them to stew in their own juices. The warning does no good and Samuel crowns Saul as its first king. It is no surprise that God was right and the people of Israel didn’t get what they hoped for in a king, except perhaps in David whose kingdom did not survive him.

As Joseph de Maistre, a French diplomat and philosopher from the late 18th and early 19th century once said “*Every nation gets the government it deserves*”. Let that sink in for a moment because whenever we talk about the people of Israel we are also talking about our own history, our own lives.

Jeremiah was writing during the last years of Judah’s freedom before it was conquered by the Babylonian Empire. Our reading from Jeremiah is just the tail end of three oracles in verses 22:2-22:30 in which Jeremiah speaks the words of the Lord to the kings, the leaders of the nation of Judah about how they were to behave or else suffer the consequences.

“O King of Judah act with justice and righteousness. Deliver from the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. Do no violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow or shed innocent blood in this place. ...if you will not heed these words...this house shall become a desolation.” God has made these injunctions to the people and kings of Israel from the very beginning. Jesus will hold the rules of Israel accountable for their misdeeds, their failure to follow God’s commandments. It is what the church hopes to witness to when it responds to issues of social justice and it is what we as individual followers of Christ are responsible for doing in our own lives whether at home, at work, in church, or in civic life.

Although the evil shepherds or kings of Judah and Israel had failed them Jeremiah’s oracle predicts that a descendant of David will bring justice and righteousness back to the land.

And that brings us to our gospel where the crowds are following Jesus like sheep. They chase him and his disciples when they try to rest. And when Jesus and his disciples take a boat to Gennesaret the people rush to him to bring him their sick.

Jesus looks at them “and he had compassion for them” Jesus had compassion for the crowd because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Compassion is God’s most consistent attitude towards his creation, especially towards us, the human beings created in God’s own image. The Westminster Dictionary of Spirituality says compassion has 3 parts: a response of emotion, understanding, and a will to act. Compassion involves an almost visceral reaction to the pain of another, which was certainly true of Jesus himself (pg 205). Compassion is the attitude we embrace in following Jesus, it’s what helps us to love our neighbor as ourselves and to help them in time of need.

And heaven knows we need God’s compassion. God has watched over us with compassion ever since the very beginning and God’s compassion is at work throughout salvation history.

- God watched over us as we screwed up life in the Garden of Eden.
- God watched over us as we immediately began murdering each other - even members of our own families.
- God watched over us as God liberated us from slavery and then complained every step of the journey towards freedom.
- God watched over us as we received God’s laws and quickly broke them.
- God watched over us by giving judges whom God guided to rule us and we demanded a king.
- God watched over us as our kings betrayed us.
- God watched over us and gave us prophets to teach us and remind us of what God wanted from us and we ignored them.

You see where this is going don’t you? We made a mess of the life God had intended for us and so God sent his only Son to live with us in our sinfulness and the mess we had created.

We messed that up too. We crucified Jesus and still God’s compassion is greater than our sinfulness. The secular powers could not break Jesus, the temptations of Satan could not break Jesus, the betrayal and blindness of his followers could not break Jesus. Jesus remained faithful and obedient to God. Death could not hold Jesus who transcended the sin with which he was surrounded, overcoming both sin and death. Because of God’s compassion, because of Jesus’ compassion, because he identified with our vulnerability, because he understood our weakness, Jesus chose to act, to become incarnate. His life and his death and his resurrection changed us all. What he left behind offers us the chance to heal in spite of ourselves and the sins we have committed, in spite of the wrongs we have suffered, and in spite of the losses we have endured. Jesus was right there with us. Jesus is right there with us. He transcended our human condition and offers us the promise of life transformed now and after our death in the age to come because Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the true king.

This is what Mark reveals in the portion of the gospel that is omitted today where the crowd follows Jesus to green pastures where he will feed them first with spiritual food and then fill their bellies in the miracle of the loaves and fishes. After feeding of the 5,000 Jesus will send the disciples back to Bethsaida ahead of him, during which time a storm will come up and Jesus will walk on water to lead them through the Valley of the Shadow of Death to safety on the opposite shore. Jesus is the true shepherd and king who has initiated the kingdom of God. Jesus

will have nothing to do with secular power or control but nevertheless manages to provide all that its inhabitants of the kingdom need to live.

At the core of the 23d psalm is an understanding that we are completely dependent on God for all of our needs. In just a few minutes we will be fed in that foretaste of the heavenly banquet, the Eucharist. Yes, we will be fed with the body and the blood of the king who was a different kind of king, the king who was sent by his Father to save us from ourselves and to lead us to our eternal destination, those green pastures where will hope to dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Sometimes that pathway has more shadows than we think we can bear and it does not mean we will not suffer along the way. Our collect gets at this when we acknowledge that God knows what we need regardless of what we ask for, regardless of we cannot yet perceive about how God is working in our lives. God can and does provide.

Say it with me again.

- 1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want.
- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters
- 3 He revives my soul and guides me along right pathways for his Name's sake.
- 4 Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
- 5 You spread a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me; you have anointed my head with oil, and my cup is running over.
- 6 Surely your goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.