

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME–2024

"If there were 100 sheep in a fenced in pasture and one jumps over the fence how many would be left?" Most would say 99. However, sheep are so dumb they would all follow the first one and there would be none left! That's why shepherds have to keep an eye on them all the time, because sooner or later they'll get in trouble, or lost, or eaten by a wild animal."

Left to ourselves, sometimes we human beings are like sheep. If we try to make it on our own or think we can, how often do we end up in a bad place and, many times, worse off than when we started. Sometimes we look away from those who can really help us and point us in the direction that we need to go. We either don't believe them or we think that what they have to offer us is too difficult to do or follow. Sometimes we allow ourselves to get too busy.

We see in the Gospel how Jesus had compassion for the people. He truly understood the human condition and knew that people really needed help, guidance and direction. Up to that point, many of the simple and ordinary people of the time, because they just didn't know any better, had allowed themselves to be led astray by the religious leaders of the time, many of whom were not really interested at all in the people but in their own personal gain. We need only to remember what Jesus did when he came into the temple and saw how the priests and the pharisees were fleecing the people by charging them exorbitant prices for the sacrificial animals and the changing of money. And worse, rather than being kindly disposed toward the simple and ordinary people, we see how they looked down on the people and saw them basically as unfit and not worthy to participate in their prayer and worship.

When Jesus came, he began to upset the system and point the people in the direction that they really needed to go. The Good Shepherd promised by God had arrived and began to teach a new lesson and in a very new and attractive way. Jesus was the true Shepherd they needed and the people sensed that; for that reason they flocked to him and didn't leave much time for Jesus and his disciples to even take a little break. What a wonderful feeling it must have been for them to sense that even though others around them would consider them last or the lowest, in God's eyes, they were the first, because in Christ, they saw themselves truly as God's beloved sons and daughters. Jesus showed this by speaking with more than just words. Soon after this moment, Jesus is going to show the people that God cares for them in their real life situations. He is going to satisfy not only their spiritual hunger through his teaching, but their physical hunger through the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. What a new and different message! God is showing his love for us in real ways; God is very near to us and we don't have to prove ourselves to God—he simply loves us and wants the best for us.

Even when we turn from God, he is still there with his healing love, mercy and forgiveness, and that like the Good Shepherd who searches out the lost sheep, there is not resentment, anger or punishment upon our return—only rejoicing and gladness.

Jesus the Good Shepherd will also teach us how to live together and reminds us of the responsibilities that we have toward one another. In other words, what Jesus teaches us is that, if we really accept his teaching and enter into that loving friendship with him, then we must treat others as God treats us. We in turn must show that very same love toward each person, whether we know them or not, even whether we like them or not. Each of us now has a responsibility to care for others in the reality of their situations, sharing the blessings of God's goodness to us with them. And, so important and often times very difficult, as we are forgiven by God, we too must try and forgive others from our hearts.

We are going through a lot in these days and are pulled in so many directions and in so many ways; we hear a lot of messages and promises that sound too good to be true and in most cases are. We need to remember that we all are part of the Good Shepherd's flock and that we need to listen to him and follow where he leads. That's why prayer is so important. As one of the saints said, "The busier we are, the more we need to pray."

I'd like to close with something I came across this past week. We are all familiar with the meaning of ASAP (As Soon As Possible). Maybe we can also think of it this way:

There's work to do, deadlines to meet, you've got no time to spare.

But as you hurry and scurry, ASAP - Always say a prayer.

In the midst of family chaos, "Quality time" is rare.

Do your best; let God do the rest, ASAP - Always say a prayer.

It may seem like your worries, are more than you can bear.

Slow down and take a breather, ASAP - Always say a prayer.

God knows how stressful life is, he wants to ease our cares.

And he'll respond to all your needs, ASAP - Always say a prayer. Rest well!

If we do, while it won't always be easy, we know deep down in hearts, it will bring us what we are all looking for, that peace and sense of fulfillment that come from knowing that we are loved by God and others, and that we in turn love them. In the immortal words of Walter Cronkite, "That's the way it is."