

16TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, B  
THE BALANCE IN CHRISTIAN LIFE

*"You must come away to some lonely place all by yourselves and rest for a while" (Mk. 6: 31)*

Today is the third consecutive Sunday that our reflection centres on the prophet, who is both a messenger of God and a shepherd of God's people. The Readings, especially the First Reading (Jer. 23: 1-6) and the Gospel (Mk. 6: 30-34) present a contrast between irresponsible and responsible shepherds. Whereas shepherds of Israel at the time of prophet Jeremiah were negligent; the disciples of Jesus and Jesus Himself demonstrate the qualities of responsible shepherds. Let us now sift the grain from the chaff for our spiritual growth.

**The Irresponsible Shepherd:** In the Old Testament the word "shepherd" is used broadly to include the king as well as priests and prophets. At the time of Jeremiah, there were unwholesome connivance and unrighteous collaboration between the kings and messengers of God in committing sacrileges against God. Many priests and prophets were figureheads, who depended on the political lords for their positions, bread, and butter. They tied their tongues by dining in unholy banquets with the political class, who were out to satisfy their selfish ego and not to do the will of God. A good example is Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, that we encountered last week (Amos 7: 10-17), who would not let prophet Amos, sent by God, preach the truth to the king. In today's passage, the God of Israel pronounces "Doom for the shepherds who allow the flock of my pasture to be destroyed and scattered." Nothing could be far from irresponsibility than to neglect one's duty of care and guidance. They were more interested in personal gains and could not be bothered by their primary commitment to the sheep entrusted to them. God, who never abandons His own promises punishment for the shepherds and care for His people. He would do more than that: He would gather His people from where they have scattered and will also raise a "virtuous Branch for David." Jesus, as we see in the Gospel is the fulfilment of this promise. We are all shepherds in so many ways. The personal call to serve is neither by merit nor having been chosen, are we irreplaceable. It is a privilege that we must respond to faithfully knowing that having put our hands on the plough we do not have to look back. For if we do, the Lord can always provide whoever would be of better use. We need to ponder: what kind of shepherds are we? Are we committed or negligent? Do we serve God and the needs of the people under us, or do we feed our desires and comforts?

**The Responsible Shepherd:** By contrast, the disciples in the Gospel represent responsible shepherds, who are accountable stewards. We recall last Sunday Jesus sent out the Twelve in pairs to preach, to heal and cast out devils and authority coast demons. This week, St. Mark gives us an account of their return. They re-joined Jesus and told Him all that they had done and taught. Thus, giving an account of their stewardship. We remember they were sent out without bread, haversack nor money for their purses. The selflessness of their mission was articulated by those instructions; they were to preach the message of Christ and not to project themselves in their favour. Having been so faithful, they return to

The One Who sent them to give a resume of their experience and service. This is what we are called to emulate in our lives as Christians – priests, prophets and kings, shepherds of the people of God. Like Paul, we have to be able to sincerely submit: “My life has been poured out like a libation. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4: 6, 7). Can we make a similar submission?

**Balance Between Work and Rest:** After hearing them, Jesus said: “You must come away to some lonely place all by yourselves and rest for a while.” This points to the fact that Jesus was happy with the work they did. The life of a Christian is a life of constant relationship and connection with the Master. John 15: 4, 5 say: “You cannot bear fruit if you do not live in me ... without Me, you can do nothing.” A true disciple needs that quiet time, that lonely place, that deserted place to “be with” the Lord. It is a place of encounter, a place of union and bonding, it is a place of renewal. There is a danger of two extremes in our lives – the danger of work without having to “be with” the Lord, and the danger of recluse or seclusion to “be with” the Lord. As much as it is necessary to spend time with the Lord in a deserted place, it is necessary to bring forth the fruits of that encounter to bear with our society. For any spirituality that has no impact on society, at least our immediate society is no spirituality at all. We need to strike a fair balance between working and praying. Remember, the Lord Jesus always found time to pray in deserted places.

**The Selfless Christ:** Jesus is the promised “virtuous Branch for David”, Who would gather the remnant of Israel from where they had scattered. This promise in Jeremiah is fulfilled by Jesus voluntarily forsaking the rest He so much needed and the quiet time He intended to have with His apostles after a tedious mission, and tending the people, who were “like sheep without a shepherd.” Unlike the many Old Testament shepherds in Israel who would abandon the sheep, Christ the New Shepherd and Messiah abandons Himself to attend to the needs of the sheep. As shepherds, we must realise the priority of the sheep in our calling. Pope Francis puts it nicely that the shepherd must “live with smell the sheep.” This can only happen when the shepherd is close to the sheep. We must know that a “sheep without a shepherd” is endangered and defenceless, it cannot find its way home; cannot find food and pasture. As sheep, we must be aware that we too must stay close to the shepherd to hear His guide; we need the shepherd for without the shepherd, we are on the verge of dangerous attacks; we would wonder, go without the essential food and possible be lost.

My dear friends, today we are called to distinguish ourselves from the rhetoric of “political correctness” that devalues the truth and puts us on the verge of neutrality, indifference, and compromise. We are called to serve God and not to dine on the table of the kings and lords of this world, who expect to dance to their drumbeats having offered us crumbs from their banquets. As much as we are motivated to do the work of the Lord; we should not forget to spend time with the Lord of the work, whose grace gives us the ability to carry on; and who alone blesses our efforts, making them yield fruits that would last.